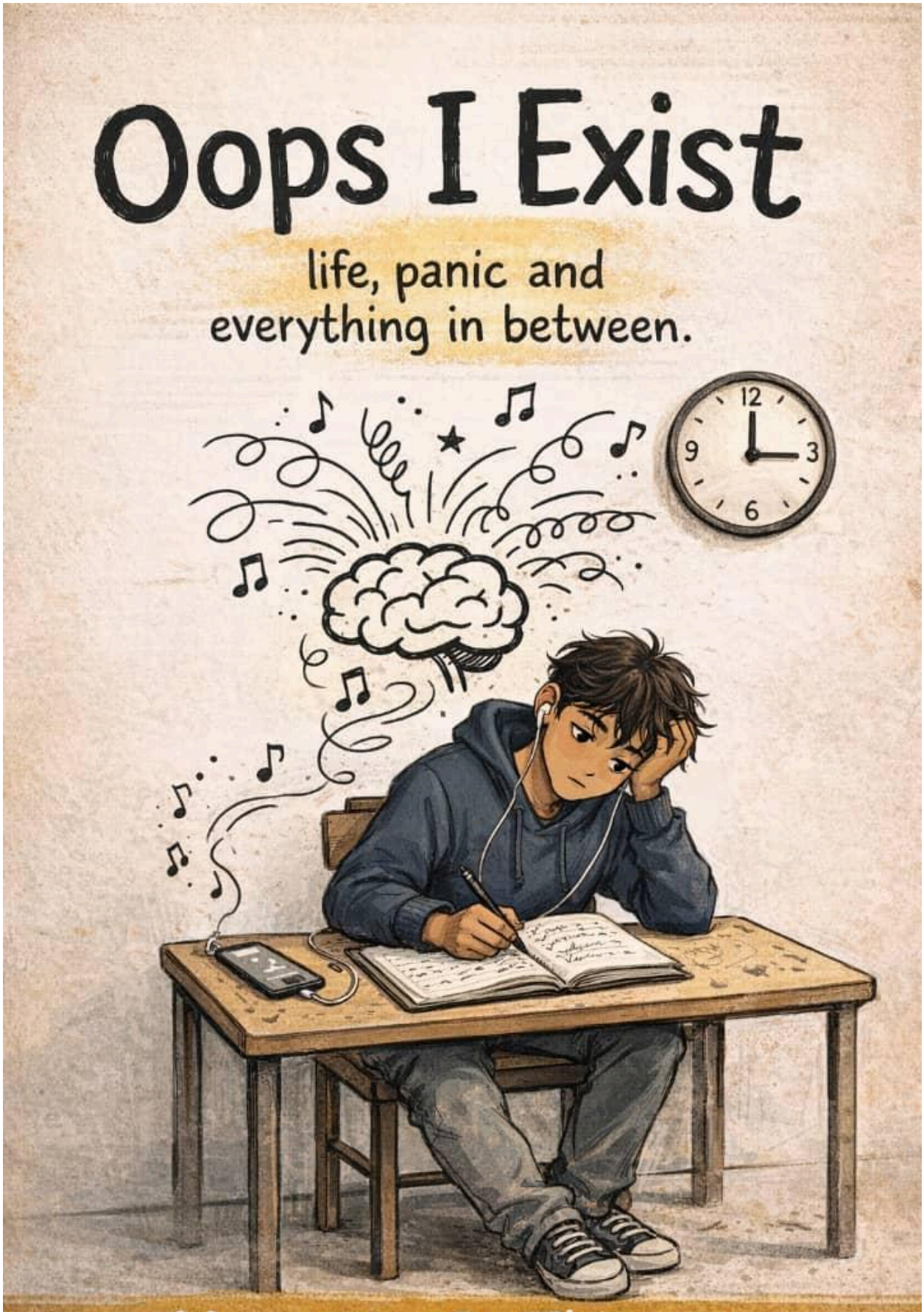
Oops I Exist

life, panic and
everything in between.



Mayowa O. Thomas

PREFACE

This book was never meant to be written. What started as scattered thoughts slowly became something more—moments of reflection, questions about life, and lessons that only made sense after the experience had passed. Some of these lessons came from mistakes. Others arrived quietly, long after certain moments were over, as if life was whispering, “Pay attention now.”

Life has a way of teaching without warning. Sometimes the lesson comes gently. Other times, it hits through disappointment, loss, or the uncomfortable truth that we misunderstood something—or someone.

The chapters in this book are reflections of those moments. They are not perfect stories or final answers. Each captures a thought, a realization, or a truth that becomes clearer with time. If these words remind you of your own experiences, perhaps that is the point. Many of the things we struggle with, question, or learn are not as unique as they feel in the moment. Sometimes, the lessons we think we are learning alone are the same ones others are quietly learning too.

And yes… that’s why I titled it “Oops… I Exist.” Because sometimes, life just feels exactly like that. You’re stumbling through panic, heartbreak, overthinking, music, and chaos, and you pause and think: “Wow… I exist. How did this happen?” It’s dramatic. It’s ridiculous. It’s honest. It’s the exact feeling that threads through every page of this book—the loud, messy, chaotic, and occasionally hilarious reality of being alive in a brain that refuses to sit still.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mayowa is a 100-level student of History and International Studies at the prestigious Lagos State University. He loves exploring the quiet lessons life teaches through personal experiences and observations, turning them into stories that connect with others.

Through his writing, Mayowa reflects on relationships, growth, and the things we often learn too late, sharing thoughts that are honest, relatable, and sometimes hard-hitting.
When he isn't writing, he enjoys watching dramas, and connecting with people who are curious about life, emotions, and the little truths that shape who we become.

FOREWORD

When Mayowa told me he was writing a book, my first thought was, “Oh boy… this is either going to be absolute chaos or pure genius.” Turns out—it’s both. I’ve had the… privilege?… of watching Mayowa live, rant, panic, obsess over music, overthink everything, and navigate friendships, crushes, heartbreaks, and random life moments in a way most people wouldn’t dare admit out loud. And somehow, all of that madness ended up on these pages, in a book you’re now holding.

Reading this is like stepping inside his brain for a while. It’s loud, it’s messy, it’s dramatic, it’s hilarious, and somehow, it’s comforting. You’ll see his chaos,overthinking, his heartbreaks, his music obsessions (yes, Billie Eilish basically gets her own chapter), and all the little things that make him… well, Mayowa. And if you’ve ever thought, “Am I the only one who does this?”—this book will probably make you realize, no, you’re not.

What’s wild about this book is that it’s not just stories—it’s honesty. It's a vulnerability. It’s laughter and tears in equal measure. You’ll find yourself nodding, laughing, screaming at some of his ridiculous thoughts, and quietly realizing that every chaotic, dramatic, overanalyzing thing he went through… makes him human, relatable and makes this book worth reading.

So, consider this foreword your invitation. Sit back, grab a snack, maybe put on some music, and dive in. It’s messy, it’s loud, it’s real, and it’s unapologetically Mayowa. And honestly… I wouldn’t have it any other way.
Welcome to his world. Enjoy the chaos.

—his therapist.

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Chapter One: I didn't change, I just stopped abandoning myself.

I used to think prioritizing myself meant becoming cold, distant and selfish, the kind of person people complain about when they say, “You’ve changed.”

For a long time, that sentence scared me. I didn’t want to be the person people felt they had “lost.” I didn’t want to be remembered as someone who suddenly became hard to reach, harder to understand, harder to love.
So I stayed soft, available, and understanding.
At least, that’s what I told myself.
The truth is—I didn’t change.
I just stopped disappearing for other people.

For the longest time, I was proud of how much I could endure. How much I could forgive. How often I showed up, even when I was exhausted. I wore it like a badge of honor, this ability to stay calm, to listen, to absorb, to be patient.
If someone needed me, I made space.
If someone was upset, I listened.
If someone crossed a line, I explained—carefully, politely, gently—why it hurt me.
I was always adjusting my tone. Always softening my words. Always making sure I didn’t come off as angry, dramatic, or “too much.”
I thought that made me good, but it didn't.
It just made me tired.
In friendships, I was always the understanding one.
The one who said, “It’s okay, I get it.”
The one who stayed even when things felt one-sided.
If someone disappeared, I understood.
If plans changed, I understood.
If effort dropped, I understood.
But the one time I needed the same grace, it suddenly became a problem.
I remember staring at my phone after sending a message to a friend. I had rewritten that message too many times—removing anything that sounded like accusation, anything that hinted at hurt. I made sure it was calm. Respectful. Easy to digest.
When the reply came, it was short. Dismissive. Like I had asked for too much by simply being honest.
That was the moment something in me shifted, not loudly, not angrily, Just quietly.
I realized I had been teaching people that I would always stay, no matter how little I received.

Looking back now, I can admit it. I was abandoning myself in the name of peace.
The breaking point wasn't dramatic. No big argument. No friendship-ending fight. It was quieter than that—almost invisible. I noticed I was always tired. Not the kind of tired sleep fixes, but the kind that settles deep in your chest.

I started replying to messages with "it's fine" even when it wasn't. I felt distant from people I talked to every day. I felt resentment toward people who didn't even know I was empty.
And that resentment scared me.
Because it wasn't who I thought I was.
That's when it hit me:
If I don't choose myself, nobody else is going to do it for me.

That realization didn't feel empowering at first. It felt lonely. Heavy. Like I had just accepted a responsibility I couldn't run away from anymore.
Prioritizing myself wasn't aesthetic. It wasn't journaling with candles and soft music. It didn't look like self-care posts on social media.
It looked like pulling back without an explanation.

Like not replying immediately, like choosing silence over constant availability.
It looked like letting people be confused about me.
And the hardest part wasn't setting boundaries.
It was the guilt that came after.
The guilt didn't come immediately.
It came later—at night.
When I didn't reply and my fingers hovered over the screen.
When I chose sleep over conversation, when I asked myself, Am I being too much? Or not enough?
I rehearsed explanations in my head that nobody asked for. I felt bad for protecting my peace, like I had committed some silent crime. I worried that choosing myself made me selfish, uncaring, or cold.

There were moments I almost went back. Moments I wanted to over-explain myself, to justify my absence, to prove I was still "good."
But then I started noticing something.
The people who truly cared didn't punish me for resting.
They didn't demand constant access to me.
They didn't make me feel like I had to earn understanding.

And slowly, the guilt began to lose its power.
Choosing myself cost me people. Not because I became wicked, not because I stopped caring.
But because access to me changed.
Some people only liked the version of me that was always available, always understanding, always shrinking. The moment I stopped over-giving, the moment I stopped explaining my boundaries, the moment I stopped chasing connection—I became "different."
And honestly? I was.

Prioritizing myself taught me that peace is quieter than chaos, but it's way more expensive. It taught me that not everyone deserves the same version of me. That love without boundaries is just slow self-destruction.
I learned that I don't owe exhaustion to anyone.
I don't owe constant availability.
I don't owe explanations for protecting my mental health.

Choosing myself didn't make life perfect. I still miss people. I still question myself sometimes. I still feel guilty on certain days.
But it made life honest.
And if you're reading this feeling guilty—for pulling away, for resting, for choosing yourself for once—maybe you're not selfish.
Maybe you're just finally listening to yourself.
And maybe that's not something you should apologize for.

CHAPTER TWO: I left Iyanoba market with only my books.

I left school around 7 p.m. that day.
Nothing unusual about it. I had my bag on my back, my books inside, my phone in my pocket, my mind already halfway home. If anything, I was tired and just wanted to get back to my hostel. Iyanoba Market was the obvious route—busy, familiar, loud. A place I'd passed through countless times without incident.

But one thing about Iyanoba Market is this:
It gets dark easily.
Not the kind of dark that gently settles in. The kind that drops suddenly, like someone switched off a light you didn't know you were relying on. The sky was still pretending it had time, but the market already felt swallowed.
It was rush hour.
People were everywhere—pushing, shouting, scrambling for buses like it was a competition nobody wanted to lose. Bodies pressed against bodies. Everyone moving with urgency, nobody looking at anyone else for too long. Survival mode, Lagos edition.
I was standing there, trying to find my way through the crowd, when it happened.
I felt a shove. Then another.
Before I could fully understand what was going on, I was pushed again—harder this time—and suddenly I wasn't just in a crowd anymore. I was surrounded. Four men. Too close. Too intentional.
"Drop everything you have."
At first, my brain rejected it.
This can't be happening. Not here. Not now.
I hesitated. Just for a second.
Then they showed me a knife.
That moment—yeah. That moment stays with you.
My heart dropped so fast it felt like it left my body. My thoughts scattered. My chest tightened. My life didn't flash before my eyes like in movies—it crashed. Images collided. Fear became physical.
I dropped everything.
My phone.
My wallet.
My ATM cards.
Everything.
They took it all so quickly it felt unreal. Like I was watching someone else's life being emptied. And the worst part? Nobody stopped. Nobody shouted. Nobody asked questions.

There was a woman standing close by. Watching. Our eyes met for a brief second. I tried to signal to her—just a look, a plea, anything.
She turned her face away.
Like she saw nothing.
That hurt more than the theft.
When they left, I was still standing there, shaking, holding only my school bag and books. That was it. That was all I had left. No phone. No money. No transport. No plan.
I didn't even know how to feel yet. I just knew something had ended.
I stood there thinking, How do I get home?
I had never needed to answer that question without a phone before.
Hope started slipping.
For a second, I considered begging for money. Just enough to get to my hostel. But the thought felt heavy. I shook it off. Instead, I started asking people if I could borrow their phone.
"Please, I was robbed. I just need to make one call."
Nobody said yes.
"This night? No, I can't. Sorry."
"Ah sorry, I no get card."
"Not now."
Some didn't even stop walking.
That's when it hit me fully:
people don't care—not because they're evil, but because everyone is scared. Everyone is protecting themselves. Everyone is just trying to get home.
So I decided to walk.
On a normal day, transport from Iyanoba Market to my hostel was about ₦500. That night, it felt like a thousand miles. I walked with fear sitting beside me, replaying everything that had happened, checking my surroundings every few seconds.
Eventually, I stopped someone and asked where I was.
"Iyana School," they said, a popular bustop around Lasu road.
The name didn't mean much to me then, but it meant I had moved forward. And then I saw a boy. Young. Holding a small phone. I asked again—no strength left in my voice.
He gave it to me, it was a small "tanasobe" phone like Nigerians would call it.
I called my mum. Hearing her voice almost broke me. Somehow, with that one call, things began to make sense again. I found my way home that night. Physically safe—but changed.
Just from that day, one thing I learnt was that people may witness your pain and still walk away—not because you didn't matter, but because fear has taught them to mind their own lives.
Help can come from the least expected person.
And most importantly: losing things is painful, but losing your life would have been permanent.

Iyanoba Market didn't just rob me of my belongings.
It robbed me of innocence.
Of assumptions.
Of the belief that being surrounded by people means being safe.
But it also taught me awareness. Gratitude. And the importance of telling stories like this—because silence protects no one.

I walked out of that night with just my books and bag.
But I walked out alive.
And that matters more than anything they took.
After that day, another thing happened—something I didn't expect.
When I started telling people what happened, some of them didn't listen to understand. They listened to judge.
"Why didn't you fight back?"
"You should have shouted."
"I would never allow that."
"Why did you drop everything?"
Suddenly, I was being made to feel foolish for choosing my life. People spoke with confidence, with bravery they could afford because they weren't the ones staring at a knife. Because their hearts weren't racing. Because their bodies weren't trapped in fear. It was easy for them to rewrite my story from a safe distance.

But survival doesn't look heroic. It looks like compliance. It looks like shaking hands. It looks like doing whatever keeps you alive long enough to get home. And I learned that day that people will always think they'd do better—until it's their turn to stand where you stood.

CHAPTER THREE: We're all just going to die anyway.

There are certain Fridays that stay with you longer than they should. Not because something dramatic happened. Not because the world shifted. But because you almost let it.
I was in JSS3A, the class everyone jokingly called “the brilliant ones,” as if scoring above seventy percent meant we had life figured out. She was in my class. We were close, the kind of close that doesn’t need labels. We talked easily. We laughed without effort. There was comfort there. But there was also something unspoken that I carried around carefully.

There was a boy in JSS3B—apparently, they called this "class for the dull ones"
I don’t even know when it started feeling like a competition, but it did. It always felt like we were both reaching for the same gold, except the gold was a person. I would notice the way she reacted to him sometimes. I would overanalyze it. I would tell myself I was imagining things. But deep down, I knew I wasn’t the only one in the race.
That Friday after school, one of my other friends, Zainob and I went to her house. It was one of those simple afternoons that feel bigger in hindsight. She cooked for us, she made jollof spaghetti. We sat together eating like we had all the time in the world. We watched movies, laughed at scenes that probably weren’t that funny, and played with her little brother. It felt warm and easy.

There was a moment — I still don’t know if I exaggerated it in my head or if it was real — but it felt romantic. Not in an obvious way. Just in a quiet way. The kind where you both look at each other for a second longer than necessary like the scenes in kdramas. The kind that makes your chest tighten just slightly. I remember thinking, maybe this is something.
When I got home that evening, I was still carrying the softness of that day. I opened her DM. I typed the message, it wasn’t dramatic, I didn’t pour out my entire heart. It was simple and honest. I told her I liked her.

I stared at it for a long time.
And then the doubts began to line up.
What if she liked the boy in JSS3B? What if I was misreading everything? What if I sent it and she didn’t feel the same? What if the friendship changed? What if the comfort disappeared? What if I lost her completely?
Fear doesn’t always shout. Sometimes it whispers logical things. It tells you you’re protecting what you already have. It tells you you’re being mature. It tells you silence is wisdom.

So I deleted the message.
I told myself friendship was enough, it wasn’t worth risking and if it was meant to happen, it would happen naturally. I chose to keep what felt safe instead of reaching for what felt uncertain.

We stayed friends, but guess what? life moved. Things shifted gradually the way they always do. But that Friday never really left me. I still see her sometimes in the back of my mind. I still replay that evening and wonder what would have happened if I had pressed send.
The strange thing is, the friendship I was so afraid of losing changed anyway. Not because I confessed, just because time does what time does.

Years later, there was another moment, a different setting but the same pattern. We had just finished sports at camp that day. Everyone was tired in that satisfied way that comes after running around too much. We were sitting inside the church hall, the air slightly heavy, people talking in small groups. He was sitting directly in front of me, talking to a few others about a digital skill he had learned. He spoke about it with ease. He talked about how it was earning him money and how it was changing things for him.
When he noticed me, he came over.
He explained it directly to me. Not in a pushy way. Just casually, like he genuinely believed it could help. For a moment, I considered it. For a moment, I imagined what it would look like to say yes.

But I had been scammed before. Not once. Not twice. Enough time to build a wall. I had trusted people online and been blocked. I had sent money and watched it disappear. I had learned the hard way that not every opportunity is real.
So when he spoke, I didn't just hear the possibility. I heard a risk.
I told myself it sounded like another one of those things. I told myself there would be other opportunities. I told myself I was being careful, responsible and wise.
I said no.
I still have his contact by the way. I still see his updates. I see how much it has helped him, I see the consistency, the growth, the proof that it was real.

And sometimes I sit with that same quiet question that followed me from JSS3.
What if?
It's strange how both moments are tied together. In both situations, I chose safety. I chose to protect myself from potential loss, I chose silence over vulnerability, I chose caution over courage.
And maybe I don't blame myself. Fear is not stupidity. It is human. Wanting to protect what you have is human. But there is a difference between protection and limitation, and sometimes I blur the line.
There's a sentence that floats into my head when I think about those moments.
Who cares, we're all just going to die anyway.
It doesn't sound dark to me. It sounds like perspective. If everything is temporary, why did I treat those moments like permanent threats? Why did I assume rejection would ruin me? Why did I assume risk would destroy me?
The girl might have said no. The digital skill might have failed. But at least I would have known. At least I would have met the outcome instead of imagining it.

We are all temporary. The friendships, the competitions, the opportunities, the comfort we try so hard to preserve. Time moves whether we act or not. Silence does not freeze anything in place.
I still think about that Friday sometimes, i still picture myself staring at that unsent message, i still imagine the church hall at camp, the tired noise after sports, the moment before I said no.
And I am beginning to understand that the real weight is not in rejection. It is in hesitation.

Who cares, we're all just going to die anyway.
Maybe it is not recklessness.
Maybe it is a reminder that choosing brave might hurt, but choosing safe sometimes lingers longer.

Maybe the lesson isn't that I should have been fearless, maybe it's that fear will always be there, and waiting for it to disappear is just another way of standing still. I used to think bravery meant being certain. Now I think it might just mean moving while uncertain.
We are all going to die anyway. That isn't a threat, It's perspective. One day, the rejection I was afraid of won't matter, the embarrassment won't matter, the risk won't matter. Even the successes won't matter in the way I think they do now. What will matter is whether I allowed myself to live honestly while I was here.
So maybe next time, I press send.

Maybe next time, I will say yes.
Maybe next time, I choose the version of myself that tries instead of the one that hides behind logic and safety.
Because if this life is temporary, then hesitation should not be permanent.
We are all going to die anyway. So I would rather risk looking foolish than spend years wondering what could have been. I would rather face rejection than rehearse imaginary outcomes in my head. I would rather lose trying than lose without ever moving.
Time will move regardless.

I just hope that when it does, I'm moving with it — not watching it pass me by.

CHAPTER FOUR: Idontwanttobeyouanymore

There are versions of myself that I look back on and feel both gratitude and discomfort toward because those versions carried me through seasons that were difficult, confusing, and emotionally heavy, but they also tolerated things I now refuse to accept, and that realization is what makes growth feel so strange sometimes. Growth is not always loud or dramatic; sometimes it happens quietly through repeated disappointments, repeated apologies, repeated patterns that start to make sense only after you step back and see them clearly.

I used to believe that if I cared deeply enough about people, if I was patient enough, understanding enough, and forgiving enough, then the relationships in my life would naturally stabilize and become consistent. I believed effort from my side could compensate for inconsistency from someone else. I believed loyalty meant staying even when things felt off. I believed patience would eventually trigger change. But experience taught me something uncomfortable: you cannot force someone to become consistent just because you are consistent.

There was a friendship that once meant a lot to me. At the beginning, everything felt genuine. Conversations flowed naturally. We talked about random things, serious things, personal struggles, future plans. There was mutual effort, or at least it appeared that way. I felt seen. I felt included. I felt like the connection mattered to both of us. And when something feels that real at the start, you start attaching meaning to it. You start assuming it will last because it feels strong.
But over time, the energy shifted.

The replies became slower. Sometimes my messages would sit on “seen” for hours that turned into days. Sometimes days turned into weeks. There were periods where communication completely disappeared without explanation. No argument. No clear ending. Just silence. And silence has a way of creating confusion because it leaves room for assumptions. I would sit there and try to rationalize it. Maybe they were busy. Maybe something personal was happening. Maybe they just needed space. Maybe I was overthinking.
So I stayed patient.

Every time the silence stretched longer than expected, I convinced myself that understanding meant endurance. I told myself real friendship requires grace. I didn’t want to react emotionally and push someone away over something that might be temporary. So instead of creating boundaries, I lowered my expectations. Instead of addressing the pattern directly, I adjusted to it.
Then one day, after another long period of silence, they came back.
The message would usually start with an apology. “Sorry for disappearing.” “I’ve been busy.” “I miss you.” “Let’s fix things.” And every time those words appeared on my screen, something inside me softened. Apologies are powerful because they signal accountability, or at least they pretend to. In the

moment, it felt like validation that the connection still existed. It felt like proof that I wasn't imagining the importance of friendship

.

So I forgave.

I responded warmly. I reopened conversations. I acted like the distance didn't hurt me as much as it actually did. Because part of me feared that if I expressed how deeply the inconsistency affected me, it might create conflict or push them away permanently. And I didn't want to risk losing someone who kept returning.

But the pattern repeated.

They would stay for a while. The communication would feel normal again. The effort would temporarily improve. The connection would feel restored. And just when I started relaxing into it again, the distance would slowly creep back in. Another phase of silence. Another period of being left on read. Another disappearance without explanation.

Then another apology.

No real transformation. Just repetition.

Over time, something shifted in how I reacted. At first, the apologies gave me relief. Then they gave me hope. Eventually, they started giving me fatigue. Because I realized that hearing "I'm sorry" repeatedly without seeing behavioral change creates emotional exhaustion. Words lose meaning when they are not backed by action.

What made it more complicated was how their return always reactivated my attachment. When someone disappears and then comes back, it triggers a psychological reset. You remember the good moments. You remember why you cared. You remember the laughter and the connection. And suddenly, the past feels stronger than the present reality. Their presence again feels like reassurance that maybe this time things will be different.

But hope without evidence becomes self-deception.

I had to confront the uncomfortable truth that I was participating in a cycle. I was accepting apologies without demanding consistency. I was accepting access without accountability. I was rewarding temporary effort with permanent availability. And by doing that, I was reinforcing the behavior.

It wasn't dramatic manipulation in the way people usually describe toxic relationships. It wasn't loud control or obvious disrespect. It was subtle emotional inconsistency that created dependency on their timing and attention. They controlled when the connection activated and when it went dormant. And because I kept reopening the door every time they knocked, the cycle never ended.

There was a moment that changed everything for me. After another disappearance and another apology, I noticed something different in my reaction. Normally, I would feel excited. Normally, I would respond quickly and try to restore the comfort of the friendship. But this time, I felt something heavier than emotion. I felt tired.

Not angry.

Not heartbroken.

Just tired.

And that tiredness brought clarity.
I realized that if someone truly values your presence, consistency will not feel like a burden for them. Communication will not require repeated reminders. Respect will not need constant forgiveness for the same behavior. Patterns that repeat without improvement are not accidents. They are choices.
So instead of reacting the way I used to, I created distance. Not in a dramatic way. Not with an emotional confrontation. I simply stopped responding with the same openness I once gave freely. I stopped chasing explanations. I stopped accepting apologies as automatic proof of change. I observed behavior before allowing access again.

That decision was difficult because distance feels like loss at first. It feels like you are letting go of someone who still technically exists in your life. It feels like you are abandoning memories that once meant something. But I slowly understood that I wasn't losing the person as much as I was losing the version of the relationship that no longer existed.
Outgrowing that friendship did not mean I hated them. It meant I had grown beyond the dynamic that kept repeating itself. Sometimes you don't miss the person — you miss how things felt before the pattern started. You miss the version of them that showed effort. But clinging to who they used to be prevents you from accepting who they consistently are.

When I say "I don't want to be you anymore," I am not attacking anyone else. I am speaking about the version of myself that stayed too long in situations that were clearly unstable. The version that ignored red flags because history felt comforting. The version that believed patience alone could fix inconsistency. The version that confused temporary attention with genuine commitment.

I am grateful for that version of me because she taught me how to care deeply and how to forgive easily, but she also taught me what happens when boundaries are weak and standards are flexible for the wrong reasons. Now I understand that access to my time and energy is not automatic. It is earned through consistent action, mutual respect, and demonstrated reliability.

If those things are missing, I no longer feel obligated to force a connection to survive.
Growth sometimes looks like silence. Sometimes it looks like distance. Sometimes it looks like choosing peace over proximity. And even though walking away from someone who keeps coming back is emotionally hard because every return reopens hope, I refuse to keep participating in cycles that drain me.
I would rather protect my mental space than preserve a connection that only functions in temporary phases.

I am not the same person who tolerated that pattern. I am not the person who excuses inconsistency just to avoid abandonment. I am not the version of me that lowers expectations to maintain access.
And honestly, I do not want to be.

CHAPTER FIVE: Being Nigerian Is Exhausting.

Being Nigerian is not just an identity.
It's a full-time job.
With no salary.
No off days.
And definitely no health insurance.

You wake up already tired—not because you didn't sleep, but because existing here requires constant effort. Every day feels like something needs to be managed, fixed, endured, negotiated, or explained. You don't just live; you strategize.
Light might come.
Water might run.
Fuel prices might increase before noon.
Transport fare might double by evening.
The network might decide today is not your day.
And somehow, you're still expected to be grateful.

Grateful for "at least there is peace."
Grateful that "others have it worse."
Grateful that you're "managing."
Growing up Nigerian teaches you early that comfort is not guaranteed. You learn how to improvise before you learn how to rest. "Manage it" becomes a lifestyle, not advice. When something doesn't work, you adjust. When it gets worse, you adjust again. When it completely collapses, you laugh, because what else can you do?

You stop asking why things are hard.
You start asking how to survive them.
Power outages are normal. Not occasional—normal. You know the sound of the generator better than silence. You learn how to read with a torch, charge phones strategically, and calculate battery percentage like it's a life skill. You plan your entire day around electricity, as if NEPA is a guest that might or might not show up.
You joke about it online. You make memes. You laugh.
But deep down, it chips away at you.
Everything here takes energy.

Transport alone can exhaust you before your day even begins. The stress of movement—standing at bus stops, shouting destinations, squeezing into buses, drivers changing fares mid-journey, traffic that steals

hours from your life—becomes part of your daily mental load. Even leaving your house requires preparation, patience, and prayer.
I remember one particular evening after lectures. I was heading home with my female friend, the same routine we always had. Nothing dramatic, just two tired students trying to get home. We got to the bus stop like usual, expecting the normal fare. On a normal day, we'd enter buses for about ₦400.
That day?
They were asking for ₦1,000 and above.
No explanation. No apology. Just that's the price now.

We stood there for a while, hoping another bus would come. It didn't. Or when it did, the price was worse. So we did what Nigerians always do—we adjusted.
We trekked.
From one bus stop to another, heading towards the next major stop popularly known as First Gate, hoping transport would be cheaper there. It was already night, around 8 p.m. The kind of night where the road feels different. Darker. Quieter. More tense. Every step required alertness. Every passing bike made you look twice. Every stranger felt like a question mark.
All of this—just to get home.

Moments like that remind you that in Nigeria, movement is not guaranteed. Leaving your house is one thing; returning safely is another. You don't just think about distance—you think about cost, safety, timing, and luck. You calculate fares before accepting invitations. You weigh exhaustion against danger. Sometimes, you choose trekking over risk because you don't have better options.
And people still say, "At least you're used to it."
You calculate transport fares before accepting invitations.
You think twice before going out—not because you don't want joy, but because joy is expensive.

And then there's money or the lack of it.
You budget carefully, only for prices to change overnight. The same foodstuff you bought last week suddenly feels like luxury. Inflation doesn't announce itself; it ambushes you. Your salary stays the same. Your allowance stays the same. But everything else keeps climbing.
You work hard, but inflation works harder.
You save, but emergencies drain it.
You plan, but policies change overnight.
Being Nigerian means constantly adjusting your expectations downward so you're not disappointed. You learn not to hope too loudly. You celebrate small wins—getting home safely, fuel lasting longer than expected, light staying on for a few hours—because big wins feel rare and fragile.

And yet, people say, "At least you're used to it."
As if survival is comfort.
As if endurance is the same thing as peace.
That's the exhausting part.
We're always "used to it."

Healthcare? You pray not to fall sick. School fees? A yearly battle. Education? Strikes turn semesters into guesses. You start a degree not knowing when you'll finish. You watch your plans pause while time keeps moving.
Being young here is especially tiring. You're told you're the future, yet the present keeps suffocating you. Dreams feel delayed—not because you're lazy or unserious, but because the environment keeps putting obstacles in your way. Talent alone is not enough. Hard work alone is not enough. Sometimes, luck and connections matter more than effort.

Then there's comparison.
You watch people your age in other countries move faster, access more, breathe easier. You're genuinely happy for them—but a small, quiet part of you wonders how far you could go if everything wasn't a struggle. If basic things worked. If effort actually translated into reward.
And still, you love this country.
That's the confusing part.
There's music everywhere. Laughter even in hardship. Strangers who help when systems fail. Community that shows up when nothing else does. Weddings that feel like festivals. Humour that survives everything. We find joy in the cracks, beauty in the chaos. We turn pain into jokes because crying every day is unsustainable.

But loving Nigeria doesn't cancel out the exhaustion.
We are called resilient.
All the time.
But resilience is a double-edged word. It sounds like praise, but it often means we've been forced to endure things no one should get used to. It means adapting to dysfunction instead of fixing it. It means surviving systems that should have supported us.
Being Nigerian is exhausting because you're always strong—even when you're tired of being strong.

You complain, but not too much.
You hope, but carefully.
You dream, but with backup plans for your backup plans.
You learn how to laugh through pain. How to adapt. How to keep moving even when nothing seems to move for you.
This country has shaped us in ways that are both beautiful and brutal. It has taught us creativity, endurance, community, and grit. But it has also stolen ease, certainty, and rest.
And maybe one day, things will get better.
We're allowed to believe that.
But until then, it's okay to admit the truth:
Being Nigerian is exhausting.
And saying that doesn't mean you hate your country.

It just means you're tired of pretending it's easy.

CHAPTER SIX: I left them in the gutter.

When I first got into university, everything felt new and slightly overwhelming at the same time. It was my first semester, my first time experiencing campus life properly, and like most people, I had heard stories about how difficult it can be to make genuine friends in university. So when I stumbled upon a group of people within the first two weeks of resumption, I felt grateful, grateful that I had found people to sit with, grateful that I had found people to talk to, grateful that I was not navigating everything alone.

The group kept growing. It started with a few people and slowly more people kept joining. Before long, we were more than seven. People kept adding themselves naturally through shared lectures, probably shared interests, and shared spaces. We created a WhatsApp group. We started sitting together on the square. We attended classes together. We joked around. We discussed random things. At that point, it felt like the kind of friendship network you hope to find when everything around you feels unfamiliar.

But as time passed, I began to observe quietly.
One thing I had been told repeatedly before entering university was to be mindful of the people you surround yourself with. Not in a judgmental way, but in a direction-based way. Because the people you consistently move with influence your mindset, your discipline, your conversations, and even your ambition. At first, I didn't think much about it. I was just happy to belong somewhere.
Slowly, patterns became clearer.

Conversations in the larger group often drifted away from academics. Topics would revolve around people, gossip, comparisons, or random distractions. There is nothing wrong with social interaction — university is also about connection — but I started noticing that growth-oriented conversations were rare. Goals were not discussed seriously, improvement was not challenged, motivation felt temporary instead of intentional.

At the same time, there was another set of people that I had naturally connected with. Initially, it started as a small study group which one of us, had named S.T.T. We came together to revise lectures, even though I didn't attend some of the meetings done most times for reasons I have not yet figured out till today. It was supposed to be purely academic. But something unexpected happened, our connection felt easier, our discussions felt aligned, we pushed each other academically, we talked about ambitions openly, we held each other accountable for assignments and deadlines, not to mention the fact that we also balanced it socially and spiritually, it did not feel forced, it just felt intentional.

When I compared both environments, the difference became undeniable.
One group provided comfort through familiarity. The other provided growth through alignment.

I did not immediately rush to leave the first group. I remember sitting quietly in my hostel at about 11pm that night. I reflected and asked myself honest questions. Was I growing there? Was I being challenged there? Were my goals being supported or diluted?
The answers slowly became clear.
So I decided to step back from the larger group.
Not with drama, not with an announcement, not with an argument.
I simply reduced my presence.

Some people interpreted that as me leaving them. Some probably saw it as me switching up. Some might have felt disappointed or confused.
Not long after, one of the girls from the group confronted me directly and asked why I decided to leave. I respected that conversation because instead of assuming or gossiping about it, she chose to ask. I told her honestly that I was still figuring myself out and evaluating what environment I needed at that stage. It wasn't a rehearsed response. It was the truth. I did not have a list of accusations against anyone. I simply explained that I was making decisions based on growth and alignment.

Even after that conversation, guilt followed.
Part of me felt like my departure might have unintentionally made it seem as though they were bad people. I never wanted to position myself as morally superior or academically superior. I never wanted my absence to feel like a silent statement that "I am better than you." That thought weighed on me because my intention was self-prioritization, not judgment.

At the same time, something else happened that confirmed my decision.
Some members of the group began moving closely with people we had once spoken negatively about or questioned in terms of character. Seeing that shift made me realize how weird group loyalty can sometimes be. People naturally gravitate toward what feels convenient or beneficial at a particular moment. That is human. But for me, it reinforced the importance of being in spaces where values are stable and direction is clear.

It was not about holding grudges.
It was about recognizing inconsistency in the environment.
The guilt I felt was real. Leaving people behind — even quietly — creates emotional discomfort. You start wondering if you abandoned them. You start questioning if you were too quick to detach. You start replaying conversations and wondering if you should have explained more.

But I had to remind myself of something important: prioritizing your growth is not the same as disrespecting others.
Choosing alignment over attachment does not automatically mean you are condemning the people you left.

After stepping away, I noticed something about maturity that I did not fully understand before. Maturity is not always about confrontation. It is not always about explaining every decision to everyone. Sometimes maturity is about recognizing when a situation no longer serves you and exiting quietly without creating unnecessary conflict.

There is power in silent transitions.
There is strength in moving without announcing your departure like a performance.
Not every separation requires a debate.
Not every exit requires a public explanation.
Sometimes the most respectful thing you can do for yourself and others is to step away peacefully and let actions speak for you.

Over time, my guilt reduced because clarity replaced confusion. I realized that staying in an environment that did not match my academic seriousness or long-term goals would have slowly influenced me in ways I might not immediately notice. Comfort can sometimes disguise stagnation. And if I ignored the signs just to avoid discomfort, I would eventually regret that more than leaving.

The smaller group I moved toward proved that alignment matters. In that space, we challenge each other academically. We remind each other about deadlines. We discuss future plans. We balance seriousness with normal friendship moments. There is honesty there. There is accountability. There is mutual investment in growth.
That contrast reassured me that my decision was not impulsive — it was intentional.

And here is the deeper lesson I learned through this experience: people are allowed to move with whoever they want, and I am allowed to choose who I move with. Relationships — especially in university — are not contracts that require permanent attachment. They are dynamic. They evolve. They shift based on values and direction.
Leaving the group did not mean I hated them.
It meant I loved my future enough to protect it.
It meant I understood that my environment plays a role in shaping who I become.
It meant I accepted that sometimes growth requires separation.
I left them in the gutter — not as an insult, not as a declaration of superiority, but as a symbolic way of saying I could no longer stay in a space that did not align with the person I am becoming.
And even if some of them questioned my absence or felt hurt by it, I had to remember that I cannot live my life based solely on avoiding other people's temporary discomfort.

If I had stayed just to maintain appearances, I would have betrayed my own progress.
So I chose myself.
I chose alignment.
I chose growth.
And I learned that maturity sometimes looks like walking away quietly while wishing everyone well.
Because at the end of the day, university is not just about friendships — it is about becoming.
And I refuse to let temporary connections determine the direction of my future.

CHAPTER SEVEN: This may contain HOPE.

There are moments in life where hope doesn't announce itself loudly. It doesn't come with dramatic confirmations or sudden breakthroughs. Sometimes it shows up quietly — through a conversation, a class you almost skipped, or words someone casually shares that unexpectedly reshape how you see your future.

For me, one of those moments happened during an elective class with Dr Britto.
I attended the class at first without full commitment. I wasn't completely sure I wanted to take the course. I went just to observe — to see whether it aligned with my interests and whether I could genuinely see myself investing time and energy into it.
While introducing the course, Dr Britto shared something that stayed with me longer than I expected. He talked about how he studied International Relations but later went back to study Law. He explained how academic paths are not always linear. He also mentioned that it is possible to pursue International Law through further studies — a Master's and a PhD — after completing a Bachelor's degree in a related field.

At that moment, something shifted inside me.
It wasn't necessarily about the technical explanation of degrees. It was about possibility.
Hearing someone who had combined disciplines and expanded his academic journey made me realize that my path does not have to be boxed into one rigid structure. It reminded me that growth in education is not restricted — it expands. It evolves. It can bend without breaking.
That conversation felt like permission.
Permission to explore. Permission to adjust. Permission to allow my interests to develop naturally instead of forcing them into limits defined too early.

I didn't immediately fall in love with the course that day. But as I continued attending classes and understanding the material deeper, my perception changed. The more I engaged with it, the more it felt aligned with where I see myself heading academically.
And now?
I can confidently say I've fallen in love with the course.
Not just because of the content itself, but because it feels like a bridge. A foundation that can support future ambition. A platform that can connect to bigger opportunities. It stopped feeling like just an elective and started feeling like direction.
Sometimes hope for your career doesn't come from grand achievements. It comes from someone showing you that your vision is expandable.

There was also a time when hope in my academic journey felt fragile. I remember waiting for admission and imagining studying Law. That was the course I envisioned for myself. When admission finally came, it wasn't Law.
For a moment, disappointment sat heavier than gratitude.

I had to sit with the reality that things didn't unfold exactly how I pictured them. It would have been easy to interpret that moment as rejection. Easy to think maybe my path had been redirected permanently.
But I chose to interpret it differently.
Instead of seeing it as a closed door, I began seeing it as a different entry point.
That mindset shift is part of the hope I carry now — believing that even when plans change, purpose doesn't disappear.

Hope in my personal growth came through decisions that required distance.
During my first semester, I found myself in a large group of people I initially felt grateful to belong to. University was new. Everything felt unfamiliar. Having a group made adjustment easier. We sat together. We talked. We created a WhatsApp group. More people kept joining until we were more than seven.
At first, it felt comfortable.

But over time, I started noticing differences in mindset and direction. Conversations often drifted away from academics. Priorities sometimes felt scattered. And while there is nothing wrong with social connection, I realized I needed environments that reflected the level of focus I wanted to maintain.
So I stepped back.

Not dramatically. Not with conflict. Not with an announcement.
I reduced my presence.
That decision brought guilt. I questioned myself. I wondered if my distance made it seem like I thought I was better than them. One of the girls from the group confronted me and asked why I left. I told her honestly that I was still figuring myself out and evaluating what environment I needed.
I respected that conversation because it was direct instead of speculative.
But even after explaining, guilt lingered.
Part of me worried that my departure painted them as bad people. That was never my intention. My intention was alignment, not judgment.

I also noticed something interesting after stepping away — some members of the group began moving closely with people we had previously criticized or questioned in terms of character. Watching that shift reminded me that loyalty inside groups can sometimes be flexible and situational.
That observation reinforced my decision.
Leaving wasn't about anger. It was about clarity.

Personal growth for me now means protecting my standards without attacking others for having different priorities.
It means accepting that distance is sometimes necessary for development.
Hope in growth is believing I am not fixed — I am evolving.
Love, too, carries a softer form of hope for me.
There were moments where I almost confessed feelings. Moments where I typed messages and deleted them. Moments where I chose silence because fear of rejection felt heavier than honesty.

I tend to overanalyze emotional risks. I imagine worst-case outcomes before allowing myself to act. Sometimes that protection keeps me safe. Other times it keeps me from expressing what I genuinely feel.

But despite hesitation, I still believe in love.
I believe in connections that feel natural. I believe in relationships built on effort and mutual understanding. I believe that one day vulnerability won't feel dangerous — it will feel secure.
Hope in love for me is refusing to become emotionally hardened because of uncertainty.
It is choosing to remain soft while still being careful.

Beyond academics, beyond friendships, beyond relationships — there is a version of me I constantly visualize.
He is more disciplined. More confident. More knowledgeable. More intentional with his time.
He understands his field deeply. He speaks with clarity. He moves strategically.
I remind myself often that this future version is not separate from me. He is the result of my present actions.
Every lecture I attend. Every boundary I enforce. Every risk I take. Every decision to improve.

They are shaping that version.
If I had to describe my life right now, it feels like a seed growing underground.
Career is the root spreading quietly, establishing stability.
Personal growth is the stem pushing upward, adjusting direction as it searches for light.
Love is the leaves forming gradually — vulnerable but necessary for balance.
Becoming something bigger is the tree that will eventually stand tall because of the unseen work happening beneath the surface.
Right now, I might not see the full structure.
But growth is happening.

This version of me may contain hope.
Hope for my career after hearing words that expanded my vision.
Hope for my personal growth after choosing alignment over comfort.
Hope for love even after hesitation.
Hope for becoming something bigger than my current circumstances.
And I am choosing to protect that hope carefully — not because it guarantees success, but because it reminds me that my story is still unfolding.
I am not where I want to be yet.
But I am no longer who I used to be.
And that alone is proof that hope is alive.

CHAPTER EIGHT: They said I wasn't man enough.

From a young age, Tobi knew he was different. He couldn't put it into words at first—just a feeling, like a quiet whisper in the back of his mind. While other boys at school played on the field, he found himself drawn to the music room, where he could lose himself in dance. While his friends talked about cars, video games and football, he preferred the elegance of words, writing stories in his notebook and talking with the girls.

At home, the comments started early. "Why are you always in the house? Go outside and play like the other boys." "Stop sitting like that; boys don't cross their legs." "You're too soft. Toughen up!" They came from friends, neighbors, even his very close friends sometimes—words spoken casually but heavy enough to leave an imprint.

At school, it wasn't much different. When Tobi signed up for the dance club, the other boys made fun of him. "That's for girls," they said, their voices dripping with mockery.

Tobi started noticing the little things—the way his classmates walked, spoke, and carried themselves. The ones who fit the mold of "masculinity" were praised, admired. The ones who didn't? They were side-eyed, whispered about, or worse, ignored.

So, he tried. He tried to walk with a heavier step, to speak with a rougher tone, to laugh at jokes he didn't find funny. But no matter how much he tried to shape himself into what the world expected, it never felt right. It was like wearing a shirt a size too small—uncomfortable, suffocating.

One day, after a particularly rough afternoon at school, Tobi found himself looking at his reflection in the mirror. He saw someone tired of pretending, someone exhausted from shrinking himself into a space that wasn't made for him. And for the first time, he asked himself: Why? Why did he have to prove his masculinity? Why did he have to fit into a box someone else created?

Maybe the problem wasn't him. Maybe the problem was the box itself.

The thought stayed with him.

Maybe the problem wasn't him. Maybe the problem was the box itself.

But knowing that didn't make things easier.

At school, he still heard the familiar remarks. His teacher once slapped his hand away when he gestured too much while presenting a topic "You move your hands like a girl," he said, laughing. Tobi forced a smile. At school, he learned to predict the teasing before it happened. When the boys talked about sports,

he stayed quiet. When someone called him “too soft,” he laughed along, as if agreeing would make it hurt less.

Then came the breaking point.

It was during a cultural event at school. The dance club had been practicing for weeks, and Tobi was one of the lead performers. Dancing was the one place where he felt free, where he wasn’t “too much” or “not enough”—he just was. But that day, as he stepped onto the stage, he heard someone from the crowd say, “Look at him. Dancing like a girl.”

The words shouldn’t have mattered. They shouldn’t have held so much power. But they did.

For the first time, doubt crept into the thing he loved most. Was he wrong for enjoying it? Was there something unnatural about moving the way he did? The thoughts clung to him like a second skin, even as he danced.

After the performance, he avoided the crowd, shying away before anyone could comment. He felt tired. Tired of the whispers, the judgment, the constant need to defend himself against a world that had already decided who he should be.

That night, he stayed awake, scrolling through his phone. He stumbled across a video of a well-known male dancer, confident and unapologetic. The comments were mixed—some praised him, others ridiculed him. But the dancer didn’t seem to care. He moved like he owned the world.

Tobi watched the video twice. Then three times. And somewhere between replaying the clip and staring at his own reflection on the screen, he had a realization.

No matter what he did, people would talk. They would judge, whisper, label. And if he let that stop him, he’d spend his whole life living for them instead of himself.

For the first time, he made a decision—not to change, not to shrink, but to exist as he was. Fully. Unapologetically.

The next day at school, when someone called him “girly,” he didn’t flinch. He didn’t laugh along. He simply shrugged.

“So?” he said.

The boy blinked, caught off guard. “So… it’s weird.”

Tobi met his gaze and smiled. “Maybe. But that’s your problem, not mine.”

For the first time, the words didn’t hurt. They didn’t matter.

Because he had finally accepted himself.

To anyone out there who has ever been told they're too soft, too different, too much—you don't have to change. The world will always have opinions, but opinions don't define you. Only you do.

Masculinity and femininity are just words, shaped by cultures and traditions that evolve with time. What truly matters is how you feel about yourself. If you are happy, if you are living in a way that feels true to you, then you are enough.

So dance if you love to dance. Write if you love to write. Speak with your hands, wear what makes you feel comfortable, embrace every part of yourself.

Because at the end of the day, labels fade. But self-acceptance? That lasts forever.
For a long time, this felt like just a story.
Like something that happened to "someone else."
Someone named Tobi.
It was easier that way.
Easier to tell it from a distance.
Easier to hide behind a name that wasn't mine.
But the truth is…
I've been in those moments.
I've heard those words.
I've felt that pressure to become something I'm not.
I've laughed along when I should've spoken up.
I've tried to shrink parts of myself just to fit into spaces that were never made for me.
So no, this isn't just Tobi's story.
It's mine too.
And maybe… it's yours.
To anyone who has ever been told they're too soft, too different, too much—you don't have to change. The world will always have opinions, but opinions don't define you. Only you do.
Masculinity and femininity are just words, shaped by cultures and traditions that evolve with time. What truly matters is how you feel about yourself. If you are happy, if you are living in a way that feels true to you, then you are enough.
So dance if you love to dance. Write if you love to write. Speak with your hands, wear what makes you feel comfortable, embrace every part of yourself.
Because at the end of the day, labels fade.
But self-acceptance?
That stays.

CHAPTER NINE: The things I detest so much about Nigerians. (1)

Before anyone misunderstands this, let me be clear — criticism is not hate. You can love something deeply and still point out the parts that frustrate you. In fact, sometimes the things that irritate you the most are the things you care about improving the most.

When I say I hate certain things, it is not coming from blind anger. It is coming from frustration built from experiences I have seen, conversations I have overheard, and patterns that repeat too often around me. These things irritate me deeply because I see how much potential gets damaged by them.

One thing I hate is how people underestimate career opportunities and kill career paths before they even begin.
I remember a specific evening that made this frustration stronger for me. I was on my way back to my hostel from school, sitting inside a public bus. It was a quiet, solemn evening. I had my earpiece on, listening to Billie Eilish like I usually do, just trying to decompress after a long day.

While sitting there, I overheard the woman beside me talking on the phone. From the tone of the conversation, it sounded like she was speaking to a family member. The discussion shifted to a child who apparently wanted to study Music as a course in university.
And then she said it.
“Music won’t get the child anywhere. It’s just a talent. His mates are studying law, medicine, and engineering.”
Those words annoyed me instantly.
Not because law, medicine, or engineering are unimportant — they are powerful fields with structure and stability. But because she reduced Music to something meaningless simply because it does not fit into the traditional definition of a “serious” career.
Music is an industry.
Music is business.
Music is production, creativity, branding, performance, and global influence.
There are people earning massively through sound engineering, composition, performance, digital streaming platforms, and entertainment businesses. Yet many people still dismiss creative paths as hobbies instead of professions.

What bothered me most was the confidence with which she killed a child’s potential without fully understanding it.

Parents and adults sometimes speak about careers as if only conventional paths guarantee success. In doing so, they unintentionally close doors for young people who might have thrived in unconventional spaces. That mindset limits innovation and discourages talent from growing freely.

I hate how casually career dreams get minimized.
Another thing I hate is the comparison culture that dominates many spaces, especially in Nigerian households.
“See what your mates are doing.”
“Your mates are abroad and you are still here.”
“Your classmate bought a car.”
“Your friend got admission.”
These statements are repeated so often that they start to feel normal. But they are deeply damaging.

Comparisons rarely include context. When people reference those “mates,” they rarely explain the support systems, sacrifices, opportunities, or circumstances behind those achievements. They only show the result and use it as a measuring stick.
Children grow up hearing these comparisons like constant pressure.
And over time, something dangerous happens.
Instead of focusing on personal growth, some young people start chasing external validation. They try to match appearances. They rush success. They make decisions based on fear of embarrassment rather than genuine passion.
In extreme cases, the pressure to measure up pushes people toward unhealthy choices just to appear successful
.
Comparison does not always motivate.
Sometimes it distorts identity.
It makes people believe they are behind even when they are on their own path.
I hate how comparison slowly steals confidence from people who are still building.
Another thing that frustrates me deeply is misplaced priorities — especially when it comes to social issues.
I see how quickly people react aggressively toward individuals based on sexual orientation. People are dragged publicly. People are beaten. People are insulted daily. The outrage is instant and intense.

Energy is mobilized immediately.
But at the same time, serious crimes like rape, kidnapping, and other violent acts sometimes receive less consistent public anger or accountability.
That imbalance bothers me.
This is not about supporting or opposing any belief system. It is about fairness in response to harm.

If someone is not physically harming others, yet society reacts with extreme hostility toward them, while individuals who commit violent crimes sometimes walk freely without equal outrage, then priorities are clearly misplaced.
Justice should focus on actual harm.
Protection should focus on victims.

Outrage should align with severity.
I hate inconsistency in moral reactions.
I hate when attention is directed toward visible differences instead of real threats.
When I observe these patterns, my frustration does not come from hatred toward people. It comes from disappointment in systems and mindsets that prevent progress.
Another thing I genuinely hate is emotional invalidation.

I hate how people dismiss other people's emotional struggles or mental health concerns by turning it into a comparison or competition.
You open up about something that is weighing on you. You try to express how stressed, hurt, or overwhelmed you feel. You expect understanding. Maybe even just silence with presence. Maybe reassurance.
And instead, you hear:
"I'm also going through the same thing."
"Don't feel special. Everyone is dealing with something."
"Others have it worse."
Those statements may be said casually, sometimes even with good intentions. But the impact is often dismissive.
It shifts the focus away from the person who is trying to express pain and redirects it to the speaker. Suddenly the conversation becomes about who suffers more or who is stronger in silence.

That feels isolating.
When someone shares vulnerability, they are not necessarily asking for comparison. They are asking to be heard. To be acknowledged. To feel understood.
Turning their struggle into a competition invalidates their experience.
Just because two people are going through hardship does not mean both hardships feel the same. Emotional pain is personal. Context matters. Capacity to cope matters. The weight of an experience is not measured by who else is struggling at the same time.
I've seen how common this response is — especially in environments where people believe toughness means suppressing emotions.

Instead of saying, "I understand. That sounds heavy. Do you want to talk about it?"
People respond with minimization disguised as relatability.
And sometimes the intention is not malicious. Sometimes the person genuinely wants to show solidarity. But delivery matters.
There is a difference between saying, "I can relate, and I'm here with you," and saying, "Everyone is going through something, so don't act like yours is special."
One builds connection.
The other builds silence.
I hate emotional invalidation because it teaches people to stop speaking about what hurts them.
Over time, if someone constantly hears their feelings reduced or compared, they eventually stop sharing. They bottle things up. They internalize pain. They pretend everything is fine.

And that suppression creates deeper issues later.

We need more empathy.
We need more listening.
We need more people who respond to vulnerability with care instead of competition.
Acknowledging someone's pain does not erase your own struggles. Supporting someone does not minimize what you are going through.
Both can exist at the same time.
But choosing to comfort instead of compete makes a huge difference.
If someone opens up to me about something heavy, I would rather say, "That sounds really difficult. I'm sorry you're carrying that," than turn it into a comparison battle.

Because emotions are not tournaments.
They are human experiences.
And dismissing them like they are insignificant is something I truly cannot stand.
At the end of the day, my criticism is rooted in wanting better.
Better recognition of diverse career paths. Better awareness about the damage caused by constant comparison. Better alignment between outrage and actual harm.

I speak about these things because silence allows them to become normal.
And I refuse to accept normalization of ideas that limit dreams, destroy confidence, or protect the wrong priorities.
If improvement makes people uncomfortable, then maybe that discomfort is necessary.
Because progress rarely happens in silence.

CHAPTER TEN: I don't remember buying tickets for a guilt trip

Have you ever noticed how some people act like life comes with a built-in guilt trip and they just hand you a ticket without asking? Yeah… I've experienced a few of those. And honestly, they can be exhausting.

It usually starts small. Someone says something innocent-sounding at first, but you know deep down it's a trap. Like a friend texting, "Oh, so I guess you don't care about me anymore?" because you didn't reply within five minutes. You read it, blink a couple times, and think to yourself, wait… I don't remember buying tickets for this guilt trip.

Guilt trips are actually more serious than we sometimes imagine. I once had an online friend — one of those friends you randomly meet on the internet and somehow, within weeks, you're talking like you've known each other forever. We texted every day, shared random stories about our lives, laughed over stupid memes, and it felt like one of those friendships that didn't care about distance.
But something about the friendship slowly started to feel… heavy.

He was always all over me emotionally. If I didn't reply quickly enough, he noticed. If I disappeared for a few hours, he asked questions. At first I brushed it off as someone just caring a lot. But one day we had a serious fight. He had done something that genuinely hurt me, and in that situation he was clearly in the wrong. I expected an apology. Something simple. Something mature.
Instead, after months of not speaking, the message I got was: "So I guess you don't care about me anymore."

I remember staring at my phone thinking, Wait… how did we get here? Somehow the conversation had flipped. The person who hurt me was now making me feel guilty for stepping back. No apology, no accountability — just emotional pressure. That was one of the first times I truly recognized what a guilt trip looked like.

And then there's the family version. That one hits differently because family guilt comes with history attached to it.
I remember one incident from secondary school that still makes me shake my head when I think about it.
I was in SS2, if I remember correctly. Our set had created a WhatsApp group — just a random group for students to chat and joke around. I happened to be one of the admins alongside two other people. At first it was harmless. We added friends from school, people added their friends, and before we knew it the group had grown bigger than we expected. Some people from outside our school joined, and somehow even a few people from other countries ended up in the group.

It was chaotic, but it felt like typical teenage internet nonsense.
Then one day, everything exploded.
One of the boys in the group suddenly sent a nude picture of himself. Completely out of nowhere. The group went silent for a second, then chaos started. Messages flying everywhere. Some people left, some people laughed, some people started panicking.
The real problem came when the boy's parents somehow saw the picture.

And that's when the school got involved.
Next thing we knew, the issue had been reported to the school authorities. Names were being mentioned. Admins were being questioned. Suddenly, what started as a random group chat turned into something much bigger than any of us expected.

Eventually the story got back to my mum.
And that's when the famous line came out.
"After all we've done for you…"
You know that sentence. The one that immediately makes you feel like you've committed the greatest crime in human history. The disappointment, the frustration, the guilt — all packed into one dramatic sentence.

Meanwhile, in my head, I was thinking: Wait… I didn't even send the picture. I was just an admin in a group that got out of hand. But at that moment, logic didn't matter. Emotion did. And that's exactly how guilt trips work.
They make you feel responsible for something bigger than what you actually did.

Friends do it. The family does it. Sometimes even strangers do it. It's like people instinctively know that guilt is one of the easiest ways to control someone else's reaction.
Miss a call and suddenly you're the bad friend. Cancel a plan and you're the unreliable one. Set a boundary and you've "changed."

Over time, I started noticing a pattern. Guilt trips usually appear when someone doesn't want to take responsibility for their own feelings or actions. Instead of dealing with things honestly, they shift the emotional weight onto you.
And for a long time, I carried that weight.
But eventually something in me changed.

I realized something simple but powerful: just because someone feels disappointed doesn't mean I'm guilty. Just because someone tries to make me feel bad doesn't mean I've done something wrong.
That realization changed the way I see these situations.
Now when I hear those familiar phrases — the dramatic sighs, the "I guess you don't care" messages, the "after everything we've done" speeches — I pause for a second and think:
I don't remember buying tickets for this guilt trip.
And that pause changes everything.
Because guilt only works when you automatically accept the ticket.

These days, I've learned something important: protecting your peace sometimes means refusing emotional rides that were never yours to take.
Not every accusation deserves your apology.
Not every disappointment is your responsibility.
And not every guilt trip deserves a passenger.
So if someone tries to hand me a ticket now, I simply step aside.

They can take that trip on their own.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: In Loving Memory of when I gave a shit.

There was a time in my life when other people's opinions felt heavier than they should have. Not just something I heard and moved past. Something I carried. Something I replayed. Something that stayed in my head long after the moment itself had ended.

Back then, the smallest comments had the biggest impact on me. A random joke, a laugh from across the room, a whisper I wasn't even sure was about me — somehow they all managed to follow me home. I would lie on my bed at night thinking about conversations that had already ended hours ago.
Did I say something weird? Did that sound stupid? Why did they laugh like that?

It's strange how the mind works when you care too much about what people think. It becomes like a detective constantly searching for clues that everyone secretly dislikes you.
Growing up, school was where most of these moments happened. Not the big dramatic ones people remember for years — just small, ordinary situations that somehow stuck longer than they should have.
I remember one day in class when we were having a normal discussion. The teacher had asked a question and people were throwing out answers. I decided to answer too. I said what I thought made sense. A few people laughed.

Not loudly. Not in a way that would make a big scene. Just enough for me to notice.
I laughed too. That's the social rule when people laugh — you join them so it doesn't look like you're offended. You pretend it was intentional, like you meant to be funny.
But the moment didn't leave me.

Later that night, while brushing my teeth, the scene replayed in my head again. Then again. Then again.
I started wondering if I had sounded stupid. If everyone in the class thought the same thing. If the laughter meant something bigger than what it actually was.
Looking back now, it was probably nothing. People laugh for random reasons all the time. But at that moment, it felt like something important had happened.

That's the thing about caring too much — it magnifies small moments until they feel huge.
Another memory that stayed with me happened during a conversation with some friends. We were all sitting together during break, talking about random things the way people usually do in school. Jokes were flying around the circle. Everyone was teasing each other about different things.
At some point someone said something about me.
Everyone laughed.

It was supposed to be harmless. Friends tease each other all the time. It's part of how people bond. But that particular comment landed differently for me.

I laughed along with them because that's what you do. Nobody wants to be the person who ruins the mood by saying, "Hey, that actually hurt my feelings."
So I laughed.
But inside my head, a quiet thought appeared.
Do they actually see me that way?
The conversation moved on quickly. Everyone kept joking about other things. Nobody thought twice about it.
But I did.

Even hours later, when I got home, the comment came back to me. I started analyzing it in ways the person who said it probably never even imagined.
That was the exhausting part of caring too much. Your mind never lets moments rest. It keeps reopening them, studying them, asking questions that don't really have answers.
Then there were moments with teachers.

Teachers sometimes have no idea how powerful their words can be in a room full of students.
I remember one day when a teacher called me out in class over something small. Maybe I wasn't paying attention, maybe I answered something wrong, maybe I misunderstood an instruction. I honestly don't remember the exact reason anymore.

What I remember clearly was the reaction of the class.
People laughed.
Again, not cruel laughter. Just the normal reaction students have when someone gets corrected publicly.
And again, I laughed too.
But I also felt something else.
A small wave of embarrassment that stayed longer than the moment itself.

The teacher moved on with the lesson within seconds. The class forgot about it almost immediately. Everyone continued writing notes like nothing had happened.
But that moment stayed in my mind for the rest of the day.
It's funny how people can move on from things so quickly while you're still mentally stuck there.
I think school is where many of us first learn what it feels like to be constantly aware of how others see us.

You begin measuring yourself through reactions.
If people laugh, you question yourself.
If people criticize you, you shrink a little.
If people misunderstand you, you feel the urge to explain yourself again and again.
For a long time, I thought the solution was to change.
Not dramatically. Just small adjustments.

Speak less. Think more before talking. Be careful about what you say.
Maybe if I controlled myself enough, people wouldn't have anything to comment on. Maybe if I avoided attention, I would avoid judgment.

But here's something nobody tells you when you're younger: people will always have opinions.
It doesn't matter how careful you are.
You can be loud — someone will say you're too much.
You can be quiet — someone will say you're boring.
You can be confident — someone will say you're arrogant.
You can be reserved — someone will say you're unfriendly.
At some point, I started noticing something strange.

The people whose opinions I worried about the most were not even thinking about me as much as I imagined.
They were busy living their own lives. They had their own insecurities, their own problems, their own thoughts running through their heads.

The moments I kept replaying in my mind were moments they had probably forgotten minutes later.
And that realization slowly changed something inside me.
It didn't happen overnight. It was gradual.
Little by little, I stopped replaying conversations so much. Little by little, I stopped trying to manage how everyone perceived me. Little by little, I began understanding that people's opinions are not permanent labels.
They are just opinions.
Sometimes people misunderstand you. Sometimes people judge you based on incomplete information.

Sometimes people form ideas about you that are simply wrong.
And none of those things automatically define who you are.
The older I got, the more I realized how exhausting it is to live your life through other people's eyes.
Trying to control every impression people have of you is impossible.
Someone will always interpret you differently. Someone will always misunderstand something you say.
Someone will always have a version of you in their mind that doesn't match who you actually are.
And that's okay.

Because life becomes much lighter when you stop trying to correct every perception. When you stop chasing universal approval. When you stop explaining yourself to everyone.
These days, I still listen to people's opinions. I still care about the perspectives of those who truly matter to me.

But I no longer carry every comment like it's a verdict on my character.
Some opinions simply don't deserve that much space in my mind.
Sometimes I think about the younger version of myself — the one who worried endlessly about every laugh, every comment, every small moment.
I almost want to sit him down and tell him something simple.
Relax. Most of these people won't even be part of your life in a few years.
But growth doesn't work that way. You have to live through those experiences to understand them.
You have to care too much before you learn how to care less.

And maybe that version of me wasn't weak for caring so deeply. Maybe he was just learning how the world works.

Still, I'm glad something eventually shifted inside me.
Because life feels different when you stop carrying unnecessary weight.
You speak more freely. You laugh more naturally. You exist without constantly scanning the room for judgment.

And sometimes, when I look back at the version of myself who cared so intensely about every opinion around him, I feel like holding a small farewell ceremony.
Nothing dramatic.
Just a quiet moment of reflection.
A gentle goodbye to the version of me who lived inside everyone else's expectations.
So here it is.

In loving memory of when I gave a shit.
He meant well.
He tried his best.
He just didn't know yet that life becomes much easier when you stop asking the world for permission to be yourself.

CHAPTER TWELVE: SOS

People often imagine that when someone is struggling, it will be obvious. They imagine loud breakdowns, visible sadness, or dramatic moments where someone clearly says, “I need help.” But real life rarely looks like that. In reality, distress is often quiet. It hides in ordinary routines, in polite smiles, in the simple sentence people repeat without thinking: “I’m fine.”

This story is about a different kind of SOS. Not the kind ships send across the ocean when they’re lost at sea, but the kind people send without realizing it. Signals that drift quietly through everyday life. Signals that are easy to miss if you’re not paying close attention.

From the outside, his life looked completely normal.
He woke up in the morning, went about his day, spoke with people, and laughed when something funny happened. If someone asked him how he was doing, the answer was always the same.
“I’m good.”
It became automatic. The words came out without effort, the way people say “good morning” or “see you later.” Nobody questioned it because it sounded normal. And in most conversations, normal is enough.
But the truth was that something inside him had slowly started to change.

It wasn’t sudden. There was no dramatic moment where everything collapsed at once. Instead, it was gradual, almost unnoticeable at first. Like a quiet shift in the atmosphere that only the person standing in the middle of it could feel.

The first signs appeared at night.
Sleep became difficult. Not because he wasn’t tired, but because his mind refused to slow down. Thoughts moved endlessly, circling the same questions over and over again. Some nights he would lie awake staring at the ceiling, listening to the quiet hum of the world outside his window, wondering why his mind felt so restless.
Sometimes he would check the time and realize hours had passed while he was still awake.
Morning would arrive eventually, and with it came the expectation to move through the day as usual.
So he did.

During the day, everything appeared normal. Conversations happened. Tasks were completed. If someone made a joke, he laughed along. If someone shared good news, he congratulated them.
But there was a quiet heaviness that followed him everywhere.
It wasn’t the kind of sadness people easily recognize. It didn’t always show on his face. It was more like carrying something invisible that nobody else could see. Something that sat quietly in his chest and made everything feel slightly harder than it used to be.

Small things began to require more effort.

Replying to messages sometimes felt exhausting, even when the message came from someone he liked. Conversations that once felt effortless now required a kind of mental energy he didn't always have.
At first, nobody noticed the change.
Why would they? Life is busy for everyone. People are focused on their own schedules, their own responsibilities, their own struggles.

But the signals were there.
They appeared in small ways.
Sometimes it was silence during conversations where he used to be talkative. Friends would be laughing about something random, and he would smile along but remain quiet.

Someone might notice and say, "Why are you so quiet today?"
He would shrug slightly and answer, "Nothing, I'm just tired."
And that answer usually ended the conversation.
Other signals appeared through distance. Invitations that he politely declined. Plans he promised to attend but later canceled. Messages that sat unanswered for longer than usual because he didn't have the energy to type a response.

From the outside, it looked like someone slowly pulling away.
But from the inside, it felt more like someone trying to stay afloat.
Because sometimes when your mind feels heavy, even the simplest interactions feel overwhelming. The effort of pretending everything is normal becomes its own kind of exhaustion.

There were moments when he almost talked about it.
Moments when the words rose to the surface, sitting right at the edge of his mouth. Moments when someone asked a simple question like "Are you okay?" and for a split second he considered answering honestly.
But the words never came out.
Not because he didn't want help.
But because explaining something you barely understand yourself is incredibly difficult.

How do you describe a feeling that doesn't have a clear name? How do you explain that nothing specific is wrong, yet everything feels slightly off? That your life looks normal on paper, yet something inside you feels unsettled in a way you can't quite define?
So instead of explaining it, he continued sending quiet signals.

Sometimes the signals showed up in his laughter. There were moments when he laughed at jokes but felt strangely disconnected from the laughter itself, as if he were observing the moment rather than fully living inside it.
Sometimes the signals appeared when he stared at his phone screen longer than necessary, reading a message and trying to gather the energy to respond.

Other times the signals appeared through simple absence. The quiet kind where someone slowly becomes less present in conversations they used to enjoy.

Each one was a small signal.

A quiet SOS drifting through ordinary moments.
But most people didn't notice.
Not because they didn't care. Most people care more than we realize.
But everyone is moving through their own storms. Everyone is managing their own responsibilities, their own worries, their own silent struggles.

Life moves quickly, and people often assume that if someone is truly struggling, they will say it directly.
But that assumption is often wrong.
Many people struggle silently for long periods of time before ever speaking about it. Sometimes they don't speak because they don't want to burden others. Sometimes they don't speak because they fear being misunderstood. And sometimes they stay silent because they simply don't know how to begin the conversation.

One evening, while sitting alone in a quiet room, he started thinking about something strange.
He had spent so much time hoping someone would notice the signals he was sending. Hoping someone would see past the automatic smiles and the quick "I'm fine." Hoping someone would ask the kind of question that breaks through the surface of a normal conversation.

But maybe people cannot recognize signals that were never clearly sent.
Maybe people cannot read distress that hides too well behind routine.

And maybe the hardest step isn't hoping someone will notice.
Maybe the hardest step is admitting out loud that you need help.
Because sending an SOS requires honesty. It requires acknowledging that something inside you isn't okay.
And for many people, that kind of honesty feels terrifying.
But there's something important about SOS signals that people often forget.

They are not a sign of weakness.
They are a sign that someone is still trying to survive.
Still trying to stay above water.
Still hoping that somewhere out there, someone might hear the signal.

Maybe the lesson isn't just about learning how to send those signals.
Maybe it's also about learning how to notice them in other people.
The friend who suddenly becomes quieter than usual. The person who laughs but seems slightly distant. The one who always insists they're fine but seems a little less present with every passing week.

Sometimes those are not just personality changes.
Sometimes they are quiet signals asking for understanding.

The truth is that many people carry invisible battles that the world never sees. People learn how to hide their struggles behind ordinary behavior. They learn how to smile at the right moments and answer questions in ways that end conversations quickly.

But hiding pain doesn't make it disappear.
It only makes it quieter.
And quiet things are easy to miss.
That's why it matters to pay attention. To notice small changes in the people around us. To ask questions that go slightly deeper than the usual "How are you?"
Because sometimes the strongest people you know are also the ones silently sending signals.

Not dramatic signals.
Not loud ones.
Just small, quiet ones scattered through everyday life.
An unanswered message.
A distant laugh.
A sudden silence in someone who used to speak freely.
Those moments might not look like distress from the outside.

But sometimes they are the human version of an SOS.
A quiet signal drifting through ordinary life.
Hoping someone, somewhere, will notice.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: THE WEIGHT OF EXPECTATIONS.

There is a kind of pressure that does not come from enemies, strangers, or people who dislike you. Sometimes, it comes from admiration. From belief. From people who look at you and decide that you are capable of great things. At first, it feels like encouragement. It feels like support. It feels like something positive. But over time, that belief can quietly turn into something heavier. Something you carry everywhere without realizing how much it weighs on you.

Expectations have a strange way of growing. They rarely start as pressure. They begin as compliments. Someone notices that you are good at something. Someone points out that you seem intelligent. Someone says you have potential. At first, those words felt good. They make you feel seen. They make you feel capable. They give you confidence.
But the more people say those things, the more those words slowly turn into a standard you feel you must maintain.

People begin to see you a certain way. Once that image forms, it becomes difficult to escape it.
There is a particular kind of expectation that follows people who are considered brilliant or intelligent. Society tends to believe that if someone is smart, success should come naturally to them. If someone performs well once, people assume they will always perform well. If someone shows potential early, everyone begins to imagine a future where that person never struggles.
But intelligence does not remove the possibility of failure. Being capable does not mean being perfect. Yet many people forget that.

Once someone is labeled as the "smart one," the expectations quietly multiply.
People assume you will always have the right answers. People assume exams will be easy for you. People assume that mistakes are something that happen to other people, not to you.
And when everyone begins to believe that, you slowly start believing that you must never prove them wrong.

There was a student who found himself in a situation like that not long after entering university.
It started in a simple way. During the first few weeks, he participated in discussions, answered questions during lectures, and spoke confidently about certain topics. Nothing unusual. Just normal academic engagement.
But people noticed.
Soon, small comments began to appear in conversations.
"You're a scholar."
"This one is too smart."
"You'll probably top the class."

At first, he laughed when people said those things. He didn't take them too seriously. After all, it had only been a few weeks. There hadn't even been any tests yet. No assignments had been graded. No exam results existed to prove anything.
But somehow, the label had already appeared.
Scholar.
It was meant as a compliment. A harmless nickname people used casually. But over time, that word started sitting differently in his mind.
Because a label like that creates an expectation.
When people call you a scholar, they are not just describing you. They are imagining a future version of you who always performs exceptionally well. A version of you who never disappoints academically. A version of you who never fails.
And that's where the pressure begins.
He started noticing something about himself. Whenever he thought about upcoming tests or exams, a quiet fear appeared in his mind.
Not the normal fear students have before assessments.
A different kind of fear.
What if he failed?

Not just failed in the ordinary sense. People fail exams sometimes. It happens to many students. But when people have already labeled you the "scholar," failure suddenly feels like something bigger.
It feels like exposure.

Like the moment everyone realizes they were wrong about you.
That fear can become powerful. Powerful enough to make someone constantly question themselves.
What if I don't meet their expectations?
What if I disappoint people who believe in me?
What if the label they gave me was never actually true?
These thoughts may sound dramatic from the outside, but inside the mind they can feel very real.
Because expectations do not only come from others. Once people place them on you, you begin placing them on yourself too.

You start feeling like you must protect the image people have created around you.
The student began noticing how careful he had become. He found himself thinking about his academic reputation more than before. The word "scholar" kept echoing in his mind in strange moments.
Sometimes during lectures. Sometimes while studying. Sometimes when imagining future exams.
It felt like a quiet reminder that people were expecting something extraordinary from him.
And extraordinary things do not leave room for mistakes.

But that belief is one of the most dangerous lies expectations create.
Because no human being lives a life without failure.
Not the smartest person in the room. Not the most talented student. Not the person everyone believes in.
Everyone fails sometimes.
Everyone struggles sometimes.
Everyone has moments where things do not go according to plan.

The problem is that when people see someone as brilliant, they often forget that truth.
They imagine intelligence as something that guarantees success.

But intelligence does not eliminate pressure. Sometimes it increases it.
The more capable people believe you are, the more they expect from you. And the more they expect, the more you begin to fear disappointing them.
That fear can slowly change how you experience things.
Instead of seeing exams as opportunities to learn, you begin seeing them as tests of your identity.

If you succeed, the label survives.
If you fail, the label shatters.
And when success becomes tied to identity like that, every challenge begins to feel heavier.
But the student eventually began understanding something important.
The expectations people place on you do not define your worth.
Being called a scholar does not mean you must never fail. Being intelligent does not mean you must never struggle.

In fact, true intelligence often involves learning through mistakes.
Failure does not erase ability. It does not cancel potential. It simply means you are human.
And humans are not perfect machines designed to meet expectations every time.
The more he reflected on this, the more he realized something else.
Most people who place these expectations on others are not trying to create pressure. They are expressing admiration. They see something promising and they acknowledge it.

But admiration can accidentally become weight if you carry it too seriously.
You cannot build your life around protecting other people's expectations.
Because if you do, you will spend more time trying not to fail than actually trying to grow.
Growth requires freedom. Freedom to experiment, to struggle, to make mistakes, and to learn from them.

A person who is afraid of failure cannot fully explore their potential.
They become trapped inside the image others created for them.
The student slowly began reminding himself of something simple.
He did not enter university to prove a label right.
He entered to learn.

Learning includes mistakes. Learning includes confusion. Learning includes moments where things do not go perfectly.
And none of those moments erase intelligence.
They simply make the journey real.
People may continue calling him "scholar." They may continue believing he will do great things. And maybe one day he will.

But greatness does not come from never failing.
It comes from continuing even after failure.

That realization made the weight feel a little lighter.
Le poids des attentes.
The weight of expectations.
It can sit heavily on a person's shoulders, especially when the expectations come from admiration rather than criticism.
But expectations only become unbearable when you try to carry them alone.
Sometimes the healthiest thing you can do is remember that the labels people give you are not contracts you must perfectly fulfill.

They are simply reflections of what people believe you might become.
And becoming something great does not require perfection.
It only requires the courage to keep going, even on the days when you feel uncertain, even on the days when the expectations feel heavy, and even on the days when you are afraid of proving someone wrong.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: The smile was real, the intentions weren't.

One of the most confusing things about people is how easy it is for someone to smile at you and still not genuinely be on your side. Growing up, we're taught that friendliness means goodwill. If someone laughs with you, sits with you, calls you their friend, then surely they must mean well. At least that's what we're told.

But life slowly teaches something different.
Sometimes the smile is real. The laughter is real. The conversations are real. Yet the intentions behind them are not.

The first time you begin to notice this, it usually doesn't come in some dramatic moment. It starts quietly, with small situations that feel strange but not strange enough to immediately question.

Maybe it happens in school. You're sitting with a group of people you've spent months around. You talk every day, joke around, share little details about your life. One day, during a conversation with someone else, you hear something familiar. A private story you told in confidence. A personal detail you shared casually, assuming it would stay within the circle.

Except now it's outside the circle.
Someone else is repeating it like it was common knowledge. Maybe they even laugh while telling it.
You pause for a moment, confused.
Because the person who originally heard that story from you had smiled, nodded, and acted like a friend when you told them. Nothing in that moment suggested they would turn around and share it elsewhere.

That's when you begin to understand that friendliness and loyalty are not always the same thing.
Another situation might look even more harmless at first. You achieve something good. Maybe you answer a difficult question in class, or people start noticing that you're naturally good at something. Everyone around you congratulates you. They clap, they smile, they say things like "You're too smart" or "You always do well."

And on the surface, it feels nice.
But later you overhear a conversation you weren't supposed to hear.
Someone from that same group, someone who had smiled earlier, is talking about you differently now. Maybe they say you think you're better than everyone else. Maybe they mock the same thing they praised you for earlier.

The compliment and the criticism came from the same place.
Suddenly that earlier smile feels a little different when you remember it.

Sometimes the lesson comes through something even more subtle. Imagine you're part of a friend group where everyone laughs together, shares memes, talks about random things throughout the day. It feels like a comfortable space.

Then one day you're absent.
Maybe you miss a gathering, or you're simply not around when certain conversations happen. Later, someone you trust mentions something strange: while you weren't there, the group spent a surprising amount of time discussing you.

Not in a supportive way.
They joked about things you said. They exaggerated your habits. They made comments about you that you know they would never say directly to your face.
And when you see them again the next day, everything feels normal.

They smile. They greet you warmly. They laugh like nothing happened.
For a moment, you even wonder if the information you heard was exaggerated.
But deep down, something has already shifted.

Because once you realize that someone can speak badly about you while still smiling at you, it becomes impossible to see those smiles the same way again.
One of the hardest parts about this lesson is that people rarely show their intentions clearly. Very few people openly admit that they don't value you. Instead, their actions slowly reveal the truth over time.

Sometimes people stay close to you because of convenience. You're useful to them in some way. Maybe you're the person who helps them with assignments, or the person who always listens when they need advice. Maybe you're simply someone whose company makes their day less boring.
But usefulness and appreciation are not the same thing.

A person might enjoy having access to you without actually respecting you.
Another common scenario happens when people feel comfortable around you but not loyal to you. They treat your presence like entertainment rather than a friendship that deserves protection.
Imagine sitting with someone who laughs loudly at your jokes, encourages you to share stories, and asks about your life with curiosity. It feels natural to open up in moments like that. Their reaction makes it seem like they care.

Later, however, those same stories become material for other conversations.
Not necessarily in a cruel way at first. Sometimes they're shared casually, like gossip people don't think twice about. But the effect is the same.
Your trust becomes someone else's discussion topic.
The smile you saw earlier was real.
But the intention behind listening to you wasn't loyalty.

One of the most uncomfortable realizations is that many people don't even see this behavior as betrayal. To them, sharing someone's personal stories or joking about them later feels normal. They don't think deeply about the consequences.

But for the person whose trust was involved, the experience feels very different.

It creates a strange feeling where you begin replaying past moments in your mind. Conversations you once thought were genuine suddenly look different.
You start asking yourself questions you never asked before.

Did they really care when they asked that question?
Were they actually interested in what I was saying?
Or were they just collecting something to talk about later?

These questions can make you more cautious with people. Not because you want to isolate yourself, but because you've learned that friendliness alone is not enough to define a real connection.

Real loyalty shows itself differently.
A loyal person doesn't only smile with you when things are comfortable. They protect your name when you're not present. If someone starts saying something unfair about you, they either defend you or change the conversation.

A loyal person doesn't treat your private thoughts like public entertainment.
They understand that trust is fragile.
And once it breaks, rebuilding it is never simple.
Unfortunately, discovering the difference between genuine friends and temporary companions often requires experience. It's something most people learn only after encountering a few situations where things were not what they seemed.

But there is a positive side to this lesson.
Once you begin noticing the difference between surface-level friendliness and genuine intentions, your perspective changes. You start observing people more carefully. Not in a suspicious way, but in a thoughtful way.

You notice how someone behaves when you succeed. You notice whether their support continues when there's nothing to gain from being close to you. You notice whether they respect your privacy even when sharing your story could make them more interesting in a conversation.
These small details reveal more about a person's intentions than their smiles ever could.
Because smiles are easy.

Anyone can smile. Anyone can laugh at a joke or act friendly in a casual moment.
But genuine loyalty requires something deeper.
It requires respect.
And respect is something that cannot be faked forever.

Sooner or later, actions always reveal what smiles try to hide.

When that moment comes, the most important thing isn't anger or revenge. The most important thing is understanding.
Understanding that not every person who smiles with you intends to stand with you.
Understanding that kindness and loyalty are two different things.

And most importantly, understanding that recognizing this truth doesn't mean you should stop trusting people completely.
It simply means you become wiser about where your trust belongs.
Because the truth is simple.
The smile might be real.
But the intentions behind it are what truly matter.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: I think I'm falling in LOVE.

It’s a strange feeling, noticing it slowly. Like a quiet hum in your chest that grows louder the more you try to ignore it. I think I’m falling in love, and I can’t decide whether to be terrified or thrilled.
It started as something almost invisible. Little things. A message that makes me smile for no reason, a laugh that echoes in my head long after the conversation ends. Moments that feel ordinary at first, but over time, they stack on top of each other until the weight of it becomes undeniable.

At first, I tried to dismiss it. “It’s just a phase,” I told myself. “It’s nothing serious.” But then I noticed the way my mind would drift toward her at the most random times. A song would remind me of her laugh. A thought about something I wanted to do, and I’d immediately imagine telling her first.
It’s confusing because love doesn’t come with a manual. There’s no guide to how it should feel or how fast it should happen. But when it does, you feel it in every corner of your body. Every text, every conversation, every glance—they start carrying more weight than they ever did before.
And that’s when fear sets in.

Because falling in love isn’t just about butterflies. It’s about vulnerability. It’s about opening yourself to someone else, knowing they could break the part of you that’s quietly fragile. It’s about giving a piece of yourself without any guarantee that they’ll handle it with care.

I think I’m falling in love, and part of me is terrified. Terrified of admitting it, terrified of messing it up, terrified of how it will change everything. There’s always that risk, right? That someone you care for deeply might not feel the same. Or worse—they might care, but not in the way you hoped.

And yet, despite the fear, there’s excitement too. A warmth that spreads through me when I think about her. A strange courage that comes from imagining a world where maybe, just maybe, this could work. The possibility of something beautiful makes the fear feel worth it.

I remember the exact moment it started becoming more than a passing thought. We were both in the department group for 100-level students—a space full of chatter, jokes, and unfortunately, a lot of people dragging and insulting others. That day, I noticed she had been body-shamed. People were mocking her in ways that made me cringe. Some of the insults were cruel, unnecessary, and completely out of her control.

At first, I assumed she’d stay quiet like most people do. I’ve seen it before. I’ve witnessed countless friends and classmates tolerate humiliation in silence. Even though I had let things slide before, people made fun of how I behaved, called me girlish, and mocking my choices. I stayed quiet. I didn’t defend myself. I just endured it in private, letting it eat at me slowly.
But she was different.

She didn’t let it go. She responded. She stood up for herself. She wrote back with confidence, with wit, with calm defiance. It was like watching someone take control of a situation that could have crushed her

and turn it on its head. And she did it without lowering her self-respect. She didn't stoop to their level. She didn't beg for sympathy. She simply defended herself with dignity.

I watched in awe as the insults fell flat. Some of the people who had tried to humiliate her started apologizing, realizing maybe they had gone too far. I couldn't help but feel a rush of respect, admiration, and…something more. That's when I realized my chest had tightened in a way it never had before, and I thought, maybe…this is what it feels like to notice someone for more than just the surface.
She reminded me of myself in a strange way. I saw the version of me I wished I could have been back then. Brave. Unapologetic. Confident when it mattered. That sense of strength in her words and posture made me feel a spark of hope I hadn't felt in a long time—hope that I could stand up to people, hope that I could assert myself when it was necessary, hope that I didn't always have to remain quiet.

And somewhere along the way, that admiration turned into a small crush. A little pang of something that I didn't fully understand at first. Yes, she was beautiful, undeniably so. But it wasn't just that. It was the way she carried herself, the courage in her words, the way she held herself accountable and demanded respect, not out of arrogance, but out of self-worth.

The thing about noticing someone like that is that the feelings sneak up on you in the quiet moments. There's something about the way she exists that makes it hard not to notice her.
Not in an obvious way, not the kind that demands attention.
It's quieter than that. The kind of presence you don't realize you've been watching until you catch yourself doing it again.
In class, I try not to look at her too much, I really do. I tell myself to focus, to pay attention, to stop being so obvious.

But somehow, my eyes always find their way back to her, It's never intentional.
At least, that's what I tell myself, It's small things.
The way she leans slightly forward when she's actually listening.
The way her face changes when she's thinking, like she's quietly arguing with the lecturer in her head.
The way she reacts to something funny—never too loud, just enough to let you know she's there, present, alive in the moment.

Sometimes it's the way the light hits her face through the window, soft and unplanned, like something out of a scene you weren't supposed to notice. And I find myself staring for a second too long.
Then I look away quickly, pretending I wasn't just watching her like she's the most interesting thing in the room.
Because honestly… she is.
There are moments when she turns slightly, and I have to look down immediately, like I've been caught doing something I shouldn't be doing.
Which is funny, because all I'm doing is looking.
But it never feels like just looking, it feels like noticing.
Like studying something you don't fully understand yet, but you want to.
And I think that's when it hits me the most.
Not during the big moments.

Not during conversations.
But in those quiet seconds in between everything else.
When nothing is happening… but somehow, everything is.
When she's just sitting there, existing, not trying to be anything more than herself.
And somehow, that's enough to pull my attention away from everything else.
I don't think she notices.

Or maybe she does, and just chooses not to say anything.
But there's something about those small, stolen glances that feel… personal.
Like a secret I'm keeping in plain sight.

Like a feeling that hasn't been spoken yet, but is slowly finding its way to the surface.
And every time it happens, I realize the same thing over and over again.
This isn't just a passing feeling anymore.
Because you don't look at someone like that…
unless they've already found a place somewhere in your heart.

That's how love begins sometimes—not with a confession, not with grand gestures, but with noticing someone's courage, their authenticity, the way they shine in moments where most people would hide. It's noticing that they make you want to be better without even trying to influence you.
After that day, every interaction in that group became a little more significant in my mind. I found myself waiting for her messages. I noticed the way she spoke, the way she responded to people, the way she expressed herself even in small conversations. It was easy to smile when I saw her chatting in the group or replying to someone. Her presence made the space lighter, but it also reminded me of the kind of person I wanted to become—strong, unapologetic, respected.

Falling in love isn't just about butterflies. It's also about learning. About growth. About seeing someone and realizing, maybe quietly, that they inspire you in ways that are bigger than the crush. They push you to reflect on yourself, on the ways you've held back, on the ways you've let fear silence you.

And it's scary. Because once you feel it, you can't go back. Your mind starts wandering in ways that make everyday moments meaningful. You replay past conversations. You imagine future ones. You wonder if they'd notice small things you do, if they'd understand you in ways other people don't.

I think I'm falling in love. Slowly, quietly, in that feeling that makes you both nervous and excited. And even if it's just a little spark right now, even if I haven't said anything, even if I don't know whether it will go anywhere, it's enough to make me think differently about people, about bravery, about hope, and about myself.
For the first time in a long while, someone's courage and presence reminded me that it's okay to care, to feel, to hope, and maybe even to let someone else see the pieces of you that you normally keep tucked away.
I think I'm falling in love. And maybe, just maybe, that's exactly where I'm supposed to be right now.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: Les amours de ma vie »

Ever since we got into university, the group hasn't been the same. What we once had—the endless laughs, the constant banter, the late-night calls, the spontaneous hangouts—has slowly faded. Sometimes, I'll send a simple "hi" in the group chat, hoping to spark a conversation, only to be met with stickers. Cute, harmless, but cold. It's a subtle reminder that the warmth we once shared isn't automatic anymore.

I know university is demanding. Lectures, assignments, exams, and new friends take up a lot of energy. I've made new friends here, friends I can boldly call brothers and sisters, friends who support me, make me laugh, and keep me grounded. But that doesn't replace the bond I had with my first group. It doesn't erase the emptiness I feel when the group chat sits silent for days, or when the replies are brief, forced, and devoid of the connection we used to have.

I'm not talking about checking in private DMs. I know people still reach out individually sometimes. That's not what I mean. I mean as a group—the space where we used to laugh together, share our lives, gossip, tease each other, and vent about school and life. That collective energy, that feeling of "we're in this together," is what I miss most. That's what feels absent now.

I remember a hangout we had at the end of our first semester, a casual meet-up to celebrate surviving the months of lectures, assignments, and exams. It wasn't extravagant, but it was meaningful. It was meant to strengthen our bond, to remind ourselves that even though university life was hectic, we were still a unit.

The day was perfect. We laughed until our stomachs hurt, teased each other relentlessly, and shared stories from the semester—both embarrassing and proud. We just enjoyed each other's company without thinking about anything else. That night, when I got back to my hostel, I couldn't help but replay it in my mind.

And that's when the nostalgia hit me—the memory of the group back home, the one that had been with me long before university. I remembered the countless hangouts, the moments spent at each other's houses, the time we visited a place fondly called Victoria Point. I remembered the endless jokes, the playful arguments, the silly competitions, and even the random challenges we set for ourselves just for fun. Those moments had shaped our bond, made us inseparable, and yet, now they felt like a lifetime away.

Sometimes, I find myself scrolling through old messages from that group. Screenshots of jokes, ridiculous memes, long threads of arguments that ended in laughter, and random voice notes that made no sense to anyone else but us. I smile, sometimes laugh out loud, and sometimes I pause, feeling a pang of longing for a closeness that seems harder to reach now.

It's strange how distance isn't always physical. The quiet in our group chat, the missed calls, the rare attempts to start conversations—they weigh heavier than any miles between us. Even when I make an effort to reach out, to spark life in the chat or suggest a hangout, the response isn't always what I hope for.

And that's okay; I know life is busy. But it's still strange to act like everything is fine when the group dynamic is no longer what it used to be.

I remember sitting in my hostel one evening, thinking about the old days. We used to have long calls that lasted into the early hours of the morning. We would gossip about people, discuss plans for the weekend, tease each other mercilessly, and yet somehow, it never felt like too much. Now, the calls are rare, and when we do speak as a group, there's a hesitancy, a quiet gap that feels too heavy to ignore.

There was one time I suggested a small meet-up during a free weekend, hoping to relive some of that magic. I proposed a casual outing at a nearby café, thinking it would be fun, lighthearted, and easy. Some responded quickly, excited, while others delayed. As the day approached, I felt anxious—worried the energy wouldn't be the same, worried that the laughter wouldn't come as easily, worried that the bond we once had might be too fragile to reignite. I even considered canceling. But I didn't. I went anyway, and it was nice, yet not the same. The ease, the spontaneity, the feeling of being completely at home with one another—it was there in flashes, but fleeting.

That's when I realized something important: friendships aren't always about constant presence. They're about history, understanding, and the willingness to make space for one another, even when life gets in the way. Even in silence, even with gaps of days or weeks without real interaction, the connection remains. And sometimes, that's enough.

But the longing for what was still lingers. I miss the old calls, the random video chats, the group jokes, the plans that didn't go perfectly but left us smiling anyway. I miss the feeling of knowing that, no matter what, there was a place where we could all exist together, unbothered by the world outside.

Sometimes I close my eyes and picture us at Victoria Point again—the wind blowing, laughter echoing, random debates over which snack was better, and the comfortable silence when someone just needed to think. Those memories remind me that even if things are different now, the roots of our friendship are still deep. Distance may have changed how we interact, but it hasn't erased what we are to each other.

I hold onto hope. Hope that one day, the rhythm will come back, that we'll have another hangout full of laughter, jokes, and stories, and that the group chat will buzz again with the energy it once had. Until then, I carry the memories, the lessons, and the subtle warmth of our bond with me.
Even if the group isn't what it used to be, the connection is alive. It's quiet, sometimes fragile, but it's there. And maybe that's enough for now—to know that no matter the distance, no matter the silence, we are still a part of each other's lives in ways that matter.

Because friendships like these leave footprints you can't erase, and even when life gets busy, the love, the laughter, and the history you shared remain.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: You don't always get the apology you deserve.

Amara always believed in people. She believed that kindness, honesty, and loyalty were things worth giving freely. She thought if you treated people with respect, if you cared for them, they'd do the same in return. That was her guiding principle—or at least, it used to be.

It all started in her first year at university. Amara had made a friend, someone she trusted instantly. They met during orientation week, bonded over shared interests in literature and music, and quickly became inseparable. She introduced him to her circle of friends, shared personal stories she hadn't told anyone, and even confided her deepest insecurities. In return, he seemed open, attentive, and supportive. Everything seemed perfect.

Then one afternoon, everything changed.

They were working on a group project together. Amara had spent weeks meticulously researching, organizing her notes, and preparing a detailed presentation. She had sacrificed sleep and free time to make sure the project was perfect—not because anyone asked her to, but because she cared about doing her best.

On the day of the presentation, her friend stepped up in front of the class and presented ideas as if they were his own. He repeated Amara's arguments word for word, claimed credit for her research, and even joked about "our amazing teamwork" as though he had done all the work himself. Amara froze, caught between embarrassment and anger.

After class, she confronted him privately. "Why would you do that?" she asked, trying to keep her voice calm. "I worked so hard. Those ideas were mine."

He shrugged, a casual smirk on his face. "You're overreacting. It's just a presentation. Chill."

No apology. No acknowledgment. Just dismissal.

Weeks went by. Amara hoped he would realize his mistake and say something—anything—to make it right. But he never did. And slowly, she began to understand: some people don't apologize because they don't care, because they don't see the hurt they caused, or because their pride is too high to admit they were wrong.

It was a painful lesson, but an important one. Amara realized that the closure she wanted wasn't going to come from him. She would have to find it herself.

A few months later, something similar happened in her part-time job. Amara had been covering a shift for a colleague who had promised to return the favor. She worked extra hours, stayed late, and helped train a new employee to keep things running smoothly. She thought her efforts would be appreciated.

Instead, she found out that her colleague had taken credit for her work during a staff meeting. The manager complimented the colleague on efficiency and initiative—words that should have been directed at Amara. When she tried to speak up, her colleague laughed it off and said, "Relax, it's not a big deal. You don't need to make a scene."

Amara left the office that day with a heavy heart, realizing once again that some people don't apologize, don't notice, or don't care. It wasn't her fault, and it wasn't a reflection of her worth. It was simply their choice to prioritize pride over honesty.

It’s strange, the weight that missing apologies can carry. It can linger in your thoughts for days, weeks, sometimes months. You replay the moments in your mind, imagining them saying the words you wish they would. You wonder if maybe, just maybe, they’ll realize the pain they caused. And often, they never do.

But over time, Amara learned a powerful truth: the apology you want isn’t always the one you get. Sometimes it comes in the form of silence. Sometimes it comes in the form of distance. And sometimes, it doesn’t come at all.

The real lesson, she realized, wasn’t about them. It was about her. It was about learning to forgive without hearing the words, to validate her own feelings, and to protect her peace even when others failed to see her worth. She learned that her value was not tied to recognition from those who refused to acknowledge it.

Amara began to understand that closure could be self-created. She could forgive, not because they deserved it, but because she deserved to move on. She could choose to let go of resentment, not because they had apologized, but because holding on would only weigh her down.

In time, she grew stronger. She stopped waiting for apologies. She stopped expecting people to validate her feelings. She found peace in the knowledge that she could survive, thrive, and carry herself with dignity, even in the absence of the recognition she once craved.

And so, Amara walked forward, carrying the lessons she had learned: some people hurt, some people disappoint, and some people never say “I’m sorry.” But the only apology that truly matters is the one you give yourself. The only recognition that truly matters is the one you grant your own heart.

She became the person she had been hoping to see in others: honest, kind, and resilient. And she realized that life didn’t need their apologies to be whole—it only needed her to be brave enough to forgive, strong enough to move on, and wise enough to never let anyone else’s pride dictate her peace.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: “Only depressed people listen to Billie Eilish” trust me, I know ball.

Somewhere along the line, people started saying that only depressed people listen to Billie Eilish.
It’s one of those statements that floats around casually, the kind people say without thinking too deeply about it. Someone hears one of her songs and immediately says something like, “That’s sad music,” or “Only depressed people listen to that kind of thing.” Most times it’s said jokingly, but jokes have a funny way of revealing what people actually believe.

I used to hear things like that and laugh along, but there was a time when it actually made me hide something I genuinely loved.

I’ve always loved Billie Eilish’s music. Not in a casual “I like a few songs” kind of way, but the type of appreciation where the music actually sticks with you. The kind where certain songs feel like they were written for moments in your life you didn’t even know how to describe.
But there was a time when I was strangely secretive about that.

It happened during one of those long summer breaks that felt endless when we were younger. The kind where school was closed for a while and teenagers found ways to entertain themselves online. WhatsApp groups were everywhere then. Someone would post a link on their status, and within minutes dozens of strangers would join. Suddenly you had a new group full of people your age from different places, all talking like you’d known each other for years.

One day, I joined one of those groups through a link someone had shared on their status. It was one of those lively groups where there was always something happening. Every night there was some sort of activity—questions, games, debates, or random discussions that went on for hours.

That particular night, the activity was about music.
Someone asked everyone to start mentioning the artists they loved the most. The chat immediately came alive. Names started flying across the screen—popular Afrobeats artists, rappers, singers everyone already knew and loved. The conversation was moving fast, messages stacking on top of each other as people excitedly shared their tastes.
It felt easy, comfortable, like one of those moments where everyone was just having fun.

So when it got to my turn, I typed the name without thinking too much about it.
“I love listening to Billie Eilish.”
The moment I sent the message, something strange happened.
The chat went silent.
Not the usual kind of pause where people are just typing. I mean actual silence. No new messages, no reactions. Just that awkward stillness where you suddenly become aware that something you said might have landed differently than you expected.

Then a message popped up.
“Why do you listen to her? Are you depressed?”
Another person quickly added, “Abi, e reach to ask.”
A few others followed with laughing emojis.
It wasn’t a long conversation after that. The topic quickly shifted to something else, but the moment stuck with me. Not because the comments were particularly harsh, but because of how instantly the assumption appeared.
Apparently liking Billie Eilish meant something was wrong with me.

Apparently her music automatically translated to sadness.
And even though I didn’t say anything in that moment, something quietly changed inside me after that conversation.
For a while, I became strangely secretive about my love for her music.

If someone asked about the kind of music I liked, I would mention other artists first. If I was playing music around people, I’d skip her songs. It wasn’t a conscious decision at first, but it was there in small ways. That hesitation. That quiet feeling of not wanting to be judged for something as simple as enjoying a particular sound.

Looking back now, it’s funny.
It’s funny how easily people can influence the way we express ourselves, even when the thing we’re hiding isn’t harmful or embarrassing at all. It was just music.
But that moment made me realize something deeper about how people see emotions.
For a lot of people, music like Billie Eilish’s feels uncomfortable because it doesn’t pretend everything is perfect. Her songs explore anxiety, fear, pressure, insecurity, and the complicated parts of being human. And for listeners who connect with that honesty, the music becomes something meaningful.

But to outsiders, it just looks like sadness.
What people don’t realize is that emotional music isn’t always about being depressed. Sometimes it’s about feeling understood. Sometimes it’s about hearing someone say things out loud that you’ve thought quietly in your own head.
And sometimes, it’s simply about the sound itself.
Billie Eilish’s music has this atmosphere that feels different from a lot of other artists. It’s soft but powerful. Calm but intense. The production feels almost like a whisper sometimes, like the songs are inviting you into a private conversation instead of shouting for attention.

There’s something comforting about that.
For me, listening to her music never felt depressing. If anything, it felt calming. It felt like stepping into a quiet room after a long, noisy day. It gave me space to think, to reflect, or sometimes just to exist without trying to impress anyone.
Eventually, I had to ask myself a simple question.
Why was I hiding something I genuinely enjoyed?
The answer was obvious.

I had let other people's assumptions shape my behavior.

And once I realized that, something shifted.
I stopped being secretive about it. I stopped worrying about whether someone would ask if I was depressed just because I liked a particular artist. I started playing the songs I liked without hesitation, the same way everyone else confidently played theirs.

Because at the end of the day, music is personal.
People connect with different sounds, different lyrics, different emotions. What resonates with one person might mean nothing to another, and that's perfectly fine.
But labeling music as "only for depressed people" says more about the listener's assumptions than it does about the music itself.

Art isn't supposed to exist in neat emotional boxes.
Sometimes a song is sad. Sometimes it's hopeful. Sometimes it's nostalgic. Sometimes it's peaceful. And sometimes it's all of those things at once.
That's what makes music powerful.
So when people say only depressed people listen to Billie Eilish, I can't help but smile a little now.
Not because they're right.
But because they clearly haven't listened closely enough to understand why millions of people connect with the music in the first place.

Sometimes people don't listen to that music because they're depressed.
Sometimes they listen because it understands them.
And sometimes, that understanding is exactly what people need.

Somewhere along the way, I stopped being secretive about it. I stopped lowering the volume when her songs came on or avoiding mentioning her name when people asked about my music taste. I realized there was nothing strange about loving music that makes you feel something real.

Now I say it without hesitation: I love Billie Eilish and I love her music. Maybe I love it a little too much. Some people might call it being addicted or obsessed, maybe they're right. But honestly, I don't mind the label.
Because if there's one thing worth being a little obsessed with, it's music that understands you. And for me, that music just happens to come from Billie Eilish.

CHAPTER NINETEEN: I have GERASCOPHOBIA

Honestly, I was just born minutes ago. What do you mean I'll be nineteen?
That thought crosses my mind more often than I'd like to admit. It sounds dramatic when you say it out loud, but sometimes time genuinely feels like it's playing some kind of joke on me. One moment you're a child who thinks adulthood is a distant land you'll eventually travel to, and the next moment people are talking to you like you're already there.

Somehow the journey from childhood to now feels like it happened in a blink. I remember being younger and thinking nineteen sounded so grown. Nineteen-year-olds were people who had their lives together, people who understood the world, people who knew what they were doing. Now I'm standing here approaching that age and thinking… wait, that can't be right, because in my head, I still feel like that kid who just started figuring life out.

Maybe that's why the word gerascophobia caught my attention one day. The fear of growing older, fear of aging, fear of time passing. At first it sounded dramatic, like the kind of word therapists throw around in textbooks. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized it wasn't entirely ridiculous, because sometimes I do feel afraid of how quickly life is moving.

Not afraid of wrinkles or grey hair or anything like that. That kind of fear belongs to a much later version of life. What scares me is something quieter: the feeling that time is running ahead of me while I'm still trying to understand where I'm supposed to go.
When we're children, time feels slow.
A single year feels enormous, waiting for holidays feels like forever. Even a single school term feels endless.
You measure life in small things. Birthdays, school terms, weekend plans. Everything moves gently.
But somewhere along the way, that rhythm changes, suddenly years start passing like months, you blink and secondary school is over, you blink again and you're in university, you blink again and people are asking what career you're pursuing, what goals you've set, what plans you have for the next five years.
Five years.
That question alone is enough to make someone pause for a moment, because five years ago doesn't feel far away at all. In fact, it feels suspiciously close, like something that just happened recently.
And if time keeps moving this quickly, then five years from now might arrive before I even realize it's approaching. Sometimes I think that's where this quiet fear comes from, the realization that life doesn't slow down for anyone, It just keeps moving.
And while it moves, things change. Friendships change, places change, even the version of yourself you recognize in the mirror changes.
There are moments when nostalgia hits unexpectedly. You'll hear a song that used to play during a particular time in your life and suddenly you're transported back to that moment. The memory appears so clearly it almost feels like you can step back into it, you remember the conversations, the laughter, the worries that felt enormous back then but seem small now.

It’s strange how memories work, they preserve certain moments so perfectly while the rest of life keeps moving forward without asking permission.

Sometimes I scroll through old pictures or old messages and I catch myself staring at them longer than expected. Not because something dramatic happened in those moments, but because they represent versions of life that no longer exist.

The funny thing about time is that you rarely notice when something becomes “the past.”
While you’re living it, it just feels normal.
You don’t realize it’s a chapter that will eventually close.
But one day you look back and realize that phase of life is gone.

Not in a sad way necessarily, just… finished.
That realization can be unsettling.
Because if the past disappeared that quickly, then the present might disappear just as fast.
That’s the part of growing up that nobody really explains to you.
People tell you to work hard, chase your dreams, plan for the future, but very few people explain how strange it feels to watch time quietly rearrange your life while you’re busy trying to understand it.

I think another part of this fear comes from expectations.
As you grow older, people start assuming certain things about you. They expect you to know more. To do more. To achieve more.
Suddenly life feels like a timeline full of invisible checkpoints, by this age you should know what you want, you should be working toward something meaningful, you should have some kind of direction.
And if you don’t, it can feel like you’re running behind a schedule that nobody actually explained to you.
But behind who?
That’s the strange question nobody answers.
Because when you really look at it, everyone’s life moves differently. Some people figure things out early. Some people change paths completely. Some people spend years searching for something that finally makes sense to them.

There isn’t a universal clock, and yet the pressure still exists. Sometimes that pressure mixes with the awareness of time moving quickly, and suddenly you feel like you’re standing at the edge of something enormous.
Adulthood, responsibility, the future.
All these big words people throw around casually.
Meanwhile, a small voice in your head is still saying, wait… I was just a kid a minute ago.
Honestly, I was just born minutes ago. What do you mean I’ll be nineteen?

It still feels unreal sometimes.
But maybe gerascophobia isn’t entirely a bad thing.
Maybe it’s simply a reminder that time is valuable.
A reminder that life isn’t something we should rush through without noticing.

Because the truth is, every stage of life eventually becomes something we miss. Children wish they were older.
Teenagers wish they had more freedom.
Adults sometimes wish they could return to simpler days.
It's a cycle that never really ends.
But maybe the goal isn't to stop time.
Maybe the goal is simply to be present while it moves.
To appreciate moments while they're still happening instead of only recognizing their beauty when they're gone.
Somewhere in the future, there's an older version of me looking back at this exact stage of life.
That version might laugh at the worries I have now. It might smile at the memories I'm creating without realizing their importance.
And maybe that future version will think something simple like, life was just beginning back then.
If that's true, then maybe the fear of time passing is actually proof that I care deeply about the life I'm living.
Because when you truly value something, you naturally wish you could hold onto it a little longer.
So yes, maybe I do have a little gerascophobia.
Maybe the speed of time scares me sometimes.
But maybe that fear is also a quiet reminder to live more fully, notice more moments, and appreciate the chapters of life while they're still unfolding.
Because even if time refuses to slow down, at least we get the chance to fill it with stories worth remembering.

CHAPTER TWENTY: YOU ARE MORE THAN YOUR EXAM RESULTS.

I think about exams a lot more than I admit.

Not just the papers themselves, but the memories they leave behind.

There was a night in secondary school I still remember clearly. I was reading for an exam — maths. It was already past midnight, then 1 a.m., then somehow 2 a.m. I knew I should sleep. My eyes hurt. My head felt heavy. I didn't even understand what I was reading anymore.

But I couldn't stop.

Every time I tried to close my book, fear showed up. Fear of failing. Fear of disappointing people. Fear of waking up the next morning and realizing I didn't do enough. So I stayed awake, convincing myself that exhaustion was proof of effort.

That night, I barely slept.

I walked into the exam hall tired, anxious, and already defeated in my head. When I saw the questions, my heart sank in that familiar way. I tried. I really did. But deep down, I already knew how it would end.

I didn't do well.

Again.

Maths was always like that for me. No matter how hard I tried, I was always below average. And after a while, it stopped being "a subject I struggled with" and started becoming "something wrong with me."

I carried that feeling quietly.

At the same time, I watched it happen to other people in different ways.

I've seen students come home with results that should have been celebrated, yet their faces were full of fear. Not because they failed — but because they didn't come first. I've heard of parents who don't ask how their children tried, only what position they took.

First or nothing.

Someone can score 86.2%. Eighty-six point two. A result that reflects consistency, effort, and discipline. But if that same 86.2% puts them in sixth position, it suddenly becomes a problem. No praise. No "well done." Just questions. Just disappointment. Just comparisons.

And that does something to a person.

It teaches you early that effort doesn't matter unless it's perfect. That being good is useless if someone else is better. That love, approval, and peace are conditional — tied to how well you perform.

So you start living in survival mode.

You don't study to learn anymore. You study to avoid shame. You don't aim to understand — you aim to beat someone else. And when beating people becomes the goal, desperation creeps in.

This is how cheating starts.

Not always because someone is lazy or dishonest, but because they're scared. Because they've learned that failing isn't safe. Because they've been taught that second place is punishment and sixth place is humiliation. Because the fear of disappointing their parents feels heavier than the fear of doing the wrong thing.
People don't talk about this enough.
We like to label cheating as bad character without asking what kind of pressure creates it. Without asking what happens when children grow up believing their worth expires the moment they fall behind.
And the truth is, it doesn't stop at school.
You grow up.

You leave exam halls, but the mindset follows you into adulthood. You become someone who is never satisfied with yourself. Someone who feels anxious even when doing well. Someone who ties their self-worth to achievements, promotions, money, titles — always chasing the next "proof" that you are enough.
You struggle to rest without guilt.
You struggle to fail without spiraling.
You struggle to believe you deserve love without earning it.

All because, at some point, nobody separated who you are from how you performed.
When I look back at that night — me at 2 a.m., forcing myself to read maths — I don't see failure anymore. I see a tired child trying his best in a system that didn't always know how to be kind.
I see effort that went unnoticed.
Fear that went unacknowledged.
Pressure that had nowhere to go.

And I think about all the people like that 86.2% student. The ones who did well but were made to feel small. The ones who learned too early that being human wasn't acceptable.
This is why I keep saying it, even when it sounds repetitive:

You are more than your exam results.
More than your position in class.
You are more than your exam results.
More than your position in class.
More than your grades.
More than how you compare to other people.
Because exams end.
School ends.

But the way we teach people to see themselves can follow them forever.
And I hope we learn — as parents, as teachers, as adults — to raise people who don't feel like they have to destroy themselves just to feel worthy.
I hope we learn to clap for effort, not just outcomes.
And I wish someone had told me that at 2 a.m., when I thought staying awake and still failing meant I wasn't enough.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: yes but NO!

There is a strange kind of exhaustion that comes from saying “yes” when every part of you quietly wants to say “no.” It’s the kind of tiredness that doesn’t show on your face immediately, but settles somewhere deeper, somewhere behind your smiles and polite responses. On the surface, everything looks perfectly normal. You agree to things, you help people when they ask, you go along with plans, you nod during conversations. People often describe you as kind, cooperative, easy to be around. But what they do not see is the small voice inside you that sometimes whispers something completely different.

That voice often says, No, but instead of listening to it, you silence it, the truth is that many of us learn very early in life that being agreeable makes life easier. When you are the person who says yes, people like you more. You become reliable, helpful and understanding. You are the person others turn to when they need support, and there is something beautiful about that. Kindness is never a weakness. Being supportive and compassionate is one of the most admirable traits a person can have.

But there is a thin line between kindness and pleasing people, and many people cross that line without even realizing it.

Pleasing people rarely starts as something negative. It often begins with a simple desire to make others happy. Maybe someone asks you for help and you agree. Another person asks for a favor and you don’t want to seem selfish, so you say yes again. Someone suggests a plan that you don’t particularly enjoy, but you don’t want to ruin the mood, so you go along with it.

At first, these things feel harmless.
But slowly, those “yes” responses start becoming automatic, you begin saying yes before you even stop to think about what you actually want.

Imagine a student in a university class who is known by everyone as “the helpful one.” Whenever someone struggles with coursework, they message him. Whenever people need notes, he shares them without hesitation. When exams approach and confusion spreads through the group chats, his phone begins lighting up with requests.
“Can you explain this topic?”
“Do you have the lecture notes?”
“Can you help me understand this assignment?”
At first, he doesn’t mind, helping others feels good. People appreciate him and thank him, and there is something rewarding about knowing you can make things easier for someone else.
But gradually the requests begin arriving at inconvenient times, late at night, early in the morning, right in the middle of his own study sessions, even when he feels exhausted, he still responds, he still explains, he still sends notes.

And every single time he does it, he tells himself the same thing: It's fine, It's just this once.
But "just this once" begins happening again and again.
One night, while staring at his unfinished assignment after spending hours helping others understand theirs, he suddenly realizes something uncomfortable.
He has been giving so much of his time and energy to everyone else that he has started neglecting his own needs.
Not because anyone forced him.
But because he never learned how to say no.
That realization is often the first step toward understanding the weight of people pleasing. It shows you how easily kindness can transform into quiet self-sacrifice.

Another powerful reason people struggle to say no is the fear of disappointing others. Disappointment can feel heavier than we expect. When someone asks for something and we refuse, we immediately imagine the look on their face, the awkward silence, the possibility that they might feel rejected or hurt.
To avoid that uncomfortable feeling, we often choose the easier path, we say yes.
A young woman once found herself in a similar situation within her group of friends. Over time, she became the unofficial planner of the group. Whenever someone suggested a hangout, everyone instinctively looked at her.
"Can you organize it?"
"Can you pick the place?"
"Can you make the arrangements?"

She always agreed. She enjoyed bringing people together and making sure everyone had a good time. But life eventually became busier. Her academic workload increased, personal responsibilities grew heavier, and she started feeling overwhelmed.

One day, someone in the group chat suggested another outing, immediately, the messages followed.
"Let her plan it."
"She's the best at this."
Without even asking how she felt, everyone assumed she would handle it again. She stared at the screen for a long moment. She wanted to say she was tired. She wanted to explain that she needed a break.

But she imagined their disappointment if she refused.
So she typed the familiar response.
"Sure, I'll take care of it."
Later that night, while trying to coordinate everything, she realized something painful. She had unknowingly created an expectation that now felt impossible to escape.
Because when you always say yes, people begin to assume you always will.

This is where pressure quietly enters the picture. Sometimes pressure is direct and obvious. Someone insists that you must do something or pushes you repeatedly until you give in. Other times, the pressure is subtle, hidden within expectations and assumptions.

A student might feel pressured to choose a career path that others believe is more respectable.

A friend might feel pressured to agree with a group's opinion just to avoid standing out.
Someone might laugh at jokes they don't find funny simply because everyone else is laughing.
In those moments, the easiest response often becomes the same familiar word.
Yes.
But inside, something feels off, there is hesitation, the answer is different.
Yes… but no.
That inner conflict can be exhausting. You appear cooperative on the outside while quietly disagreeing within yourself. The longer that pattern continues, the more disconnected you start feeling from your own voice, eventually, that voice demands to be heard.
Growing into your own voice is one of the most important and difficult parts of becoming yourself. It requires learning how to recognize your own boundaries and respecting them, even when doing so feels uncomfortable.

It might begin with small moments.
Someone invites you somewhere, and for the first time you say you can't make it.
Someone asks you to take on extra work, and you politely explain that you're already overwhelmed.
A conversation shifts toward a topic where you disagree, and instead of nodding silently, you calmly express your own opinion.

These moments may seem insignificant, but they carry powerful meaning. Each time you speak honestly, you remind yourself that your voice matters.
There was once a quiet student who spent years sitting silently during group discussions in class. While others spoke confidently, he remained in the background, listening but rarely contributing.
It wasn't that he lacked ideas.
It was that he feared saying something wrong.
One day, during a discussion about a topic he understood deeply, the conversation started moving in a direction he strongly disagreed with. As usual, he considered staying silent.

But something inside him resisted.
Slowly, he raised his hand and shared his perspective.
For a brief moment, the room became quiet.
Then someone responded to his point.
Another person joined the conversation.
Soon, the discussion evolved into a thoughtful exchange of ideas sparked by the very comment he almost kept to himself.

After class, a classmate approached him and said something simple but meaningful.
"You should speak more often."
That moment stayed with him. Not because everyone agreed with his opinion, but because he realized something important.
Speaking your truth doesn't require universal approval.
It only requires courage.

Learning to say no is part of that courage. It is not about rejecting people or becoming selfish. It is about understanding that your time, energy, and peace deserve protection too.

At first, saying no might feel uncomfortable. You might worry about disappointing people or appearing uncooperative. You might even feel guilty.
But over time, something remarkable begins to happen.
You start feeling lighter.
Because every honest “no” makes space for the things that genuinely deserve your “yes.”

Life isn’t about refusing everything or isolating yourself from others. It’s about choosing wisely. Choosing when to help. Choosing when to participate. Choosing when to step back and prioritize your own well-being.

Most importantly, it is about learning to listen to yourself.
That is why the phrase “Yes, but NO!” perfectly captures this journey.
It reflects the moment when politeness meets honesty.
The moment when kindness meets self-respect.
The moment when the version of you that always said yes pauses long enough to ask a simple question.
Do I actually want this?
Sometimes the answer will still be yes.
But sometimes the answer will finally be the word that once felt so difficult to say.
No.
And saying that word does not make you selfish.
It simply means you are learning how to be real.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: Pistanthrophobia.

Fear has many names, but some of them are so unfamiliar that people experience them without even realizing what they are feeling. Some fears are loud and obvious, fear of heights makes your heart beat faster when you stand near the edge of a tall building, fear of darkness makes every shadow feel suspicious and every sound louder than it should be. Those fears are easy to recognize.

But some fears are quiet. They hide behind normal conversations,polite smiles, behind the calm expression someone wears while their mind quietly questions everything around them. These fears do not scream for attention, they whisper.

One of those fears is pistanthrophobia — the fear of trusting people again after you have been hurt.

Unlike many other fears, this one is rarely born from imagination. It is born from experience, something happened once. Someone said something they shouldn't have said, or someone did something they promised they would never do. Maybe it was a betrayal, dishonesty or maybe it was the slow realization that the person you believed in most was not the person you thought they were.

For Lara, that fear did not appear overnight. It grew slowly, like a crack forming in glass.

Lara had always been the kind of person people felt comfortable around. She laughed easily, spoke honestly, and believed that the world was a place where sincerity still mattered. If someone told her they cared, she believed them. If someone promised something, she trusted that they would keep their word. To Lara, relationships were simple. You respected people who respected you, stayed loyal to people who stayed loyal to you.

Then she met Daniel.
They met during their first year at university. It wasn't one of those dramatic movie-like encounters where everything feels magical from the first moment. Their story began in a much simpler way. They were assigned to the same group for a class project. At first, their conversations were strictly about the assignment. They met in the library, compared notes, discussed how to divide the work, and complained about how confusing some of the lectures were.

But over time, the conversations started changing. After finishing the project discussions, they would keep talking. Sometimes they talked about music, childhood memories, and the strange pressure of university life and the quiet fear everyone had of failing exams.

Daniel was easy to talk to. He listened carefully, and when Lara spoke, she felt like he was genuinely interested in what she had to say. Not the kind of listening where someone nods absentmindedly while checking their phone, but the kind where someone remembers small details days later.

He remembered that Lara hated pineapple on pizza.
He remembered the name of the cartoon she used to watch when she was a child.

He remembered a story she told about getting lost at a crowded market when she was nine years old.
Those little things made Lara feel special in a way she had never experienced before.

Eventually their friendship grew into something deeper. It happened so naturally that neither of them even realized the exact moment it changed. Late-night phone calls became normal. Random messages during the day appeared on her phone just to ask how she was doing. When they walked across campus together, there was an unspoken closeness between them that everyone around them could notice.

For Lara, this was what trust looked like.
Trust meant sharing pieces of your life without fear. Trust meant knowing that the person standing beside you would protect your vulnerability instead of using it against you.
For a while, everything felt right.
But sometimes the end of something begins quietly.
The first signs were small. Daniel started replying to messages slower than before. Sometimes hours would pass before he answered a simple question. Phone calls that used to last for hours became shorter. Sometimes he sounded distracted during conversations, as if his attention was somewhere else.

Whenever Lara asked if something was wrong, Daniel always had an explanation.
"I'm just busy."
"Classes are stressful."
"You're thinking too much."
And Lara believed him.
Because trust often means choosing belief even when doubt quietly tries to enter your mind.

But doubt rarely disappears once it has appeared. It grows slowly, especially when questions remain unanswered.
One afternoon Lara was sitting with two of her friends at a small café near campus when one of them said something that made her stomach tighten.

"I think I saw Daniel yesterday," her friend said casually. "He was with another girl."
Lara laughed immediately, brushing the comment away as if it meant nothing.
"That's probably just someone from his class," she replied.
But even though she tried to dismiss the thought, the words stayed in her mind long after the conversation ended.

Over the next few days she began noticing small things she had never paid attention to before. Daniel had become strangely protective of his phone. Whenever he received a message while she was nearby, he tilted the screen away slightly. When she asked who he was talking to, his answers were always vague.
"Just a friend."
"Someone from class."
"No one important."
For the first time since their relationship began, Lara felt something uncomfortable growing inside her.
Suspicion.

She hated that feeling. Suspicion felt like betrayal. It felt like she was doubting someone she loved. So she tried to ignore it, convincing herself that everything was fine.
Until one afternoon when she saw something she could not explain away.

She was walking across campus when she noticed Daniel standing near the university gate. He was talking to a girl Lara had never seen before. At first, nothing seemed unusual, people talked to each other on campus all the time.
But then she saw the way he looked at the girl, the same softness, familiarity and the same quiet affection he once showed Lara.

At that moment, the world around her seemed to pause.
Later that evening she confronted him. She expected honesty. She expected at least an explanation that made sense.
Instead, Daniel denied everything.
“You’re misunderstanding the situation,” he said.
“She’s just a friend.”
“You’re overreacting.”
But when the truth became impossible to hide, his strategy changed.
Suddenly the problem was not his actions.
The problem was Lara.
“You’re too suspicious.”
“You don’t trust me.”
“You’re making drama out of nothing.”

Those kinds of words can be more damaging than the betrayal itself. They twist reality in a way that makes someone question their own feelings. For weeks Lara found herself trapped in confusion, wondering if maybe she had misunderstood something.
Eventually, however, the truth became too clear to ignore.
So she ended the relationship.

Walking away from someone you once trusted deeply feels like tearing a piece out of your own life. But the breakup was not the hardest part.
The hardest part came afterward.
Time passed. Life continued moving forward. Classes continued. Assignments piled up. New people entered her life, new friendships began forming.

But something inside Lara had changed.
Whenever someone tried to get close to her, she felt a quiet hesitation she had never experienced before. When someone complimented her, she wondered if they meant it. When someone showed interest in her, she wondered how long it would last. When someone promised something, she wondered if the promise would eventually break.

It was not that she wanted to feel this way.
But once trust has been broken deeply, the mind learns to protect itself.

That was when Lara realized she had developed something she had never heard about before.
The fear of trusting again.
Pistanthrophobia does not turn someone into a cold or heartless person. It simply makes them careful. It makes them observe more closely. It makes them think twice before allowing someone into the most vulnerable parts of their life.

And maybe that caution is not entirely a bad thing.
Trust should never be given recklessly. It should grow slowly through actions, through consistency, through honesty that proves itself over time.

One day someone might enter Lara's life who understands that healing takes patience. Someone who does not rush her into lowering her guard. Someone who proves through actions that not every person repeats the same mistakes.
Until that day arrives, Lara carries an important lesson with her.

Some people leave scars.
But those scars are not only reminders of pain.
They are reminders of strength.
Because surviving betrayal means learning how to protect your heart without completely closing it.
And perhaps that balance between caution and hope is the true meaning of pistanthrophobia.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: Interlude.

The morning always begins the same way.
Not with the alarm, the alarm rings, yes, but it's never what actually wakes me up. What wakes me up is the heaviness. It sits on my chest before my eyes even open, like someone quietly placed a weight there during the night. I lie still for a few seconds, staring at the ceiling, trying to remember what day it is and why I should get out of bed.

Sometimes I succeed quickly. Other times it takes longer. Today is one of the longer mornings.
The alarm keeps ringing until I finally reach for my phone and silence it. The room is quiet again, but the quiet doesn't feel peaceful. It feels loud in a different way, like something is humming under the surface that no one else can hear.

I sit up slowly. My room looks the same as it always does: a chair with clothes thrown over it, a half-finished notebook on my desk, a cup I forgot to take to the kitchen last night. Nothing dramatic, broken and nothing that would make anyone think something is wrong.
And yet something always feels wrong.

I drag myself out of bed and go through the routine. Brush teeth. Shower. Get dressed. The routine helps because routines don't require thinking. You just follow the steps like instructions on a manual.

Outside, the world is already moving. People walk past the street with purpose. Someone is laughing loudly on a phone call. A car honks impatiently at another car. The sun is bright, almost annoyingly bright, as if the day is exciting to begin.

I wish I felt the same excitement.
Instead, I watch everyone like an observer in a movie. I'm present, technically. I'm here. But there's always this strange distance between me and everything else, like there's an invisible glass wall separating me from the world.

At school—or work, or wherever I'm expected to be that day—people greet each other normally.
"Good morning!"
"How was your night?"
"Did you finish that assignment?"

I respond the way I'm supposed to. I smile when necessary. I laugh when the conversation demands laughter. I nod at the right moments. If someone were watching closely, they would say I blend in perfectly.
But blending in is not the same thing as feeling okay.
During a lecture, or a meeting, or a conversation, my mind sometimes drifts. Not dramatically. Just enough that the words around me become background noise. I hear them, but they pass through me like wind through an open window.

Instead, my thoughts start running their usual marathon.
Did I say something weird earlier?
Did that person look annoyed at me?
Why do I always feel like I'm behind everyone else?
What if everyone secretly thinks I'm not good enough?
The thoughts arrive quietly but multiply quickly. One becomes three. Three becomes ten. Soon my mind is crowded with questions that have no answers.
Someone suddenly calls my name, I snap back.
"Are you listening?"
"Yeah," I say quickly. "Sorry."

They shrug and continue talking, unaware that my mind just traveled a thousand miles away and back in the span of a few seconds.

By afternoon, the exhaustion begins to settle in.
Not the kind that comes from physical work. It's a different type of tiredness. The kind that comes from constantly managing your own thoughts, constantly making sure your face looks normal, constantly making sure no one notices the storm happening inside your head.

People talk about being tired from doing too much.
But they rarely talk about being tired from thinking too much.
Later in the day, a friend tells a funny story. Everyone around the table bursts into laughter. I laugh too, because the story really is funny. For a moment, I even forget the heaviness.

Moments like that feel like small windows opening.
But windows close eventually.
When the laughter fades and the conversation moves on, the familiar feeling quietly returns. Not dramatically. Not loudly. Just a quiet whisper in the back of my mind.
You're still not okay.

Evenings are the strangest part of the day.
That's when the world starts slowing down. People go home. Streets become quieter. The sky darkens. The distractions fade.

And when distractions fade, thoughts get louder.
I sit in my room again, staring at the same desk from the morning. The same notebook. The same chair. The same walls. Nothing has changed, but everything feels heavier somehow.

I open my phone and scroll through social media.
Pictures of smiling people, friends hanging out, someone celebrating an achievement, another person posting about how great life is.
And suddenly the quiet whisper in my head becomes a louder voice.
Why can't you be like them?
Why does everything feel harder for you?

What's wrong with you?

I try to ignore it. Sometimes I put on music to drown it out. Sometimes I open a book. Sometimes I just stare at the ceiling again, hoping sleep will come quickly.
But sleep has its own rules. Some nights it arrives easily.
Other nights my mind refuses to turn off. Thoughts replay conversations from years ago, embarrassing moments resurface like ghosts and tiny mistakes feel enormous in the dark.
Midnight passes.
Then one a.m.
Then two.
Eventually exhaustion wins, and I fall asleep not because my mind is calm, but because my body has simply given up.

From the outside, my life probably looks normal.
I go out, I talk to people, I laugh, I study and I exist the way everyone else exists.
Most people would never notice the constant battle happening quietly in the background. They would never notice the way simple things sometimes feel impossibly heavy, or how ordinary days can feel like mountains to climb.

One afternoon, a friend who had been quietly observing me for weeks finally asked:
"How long have you been going through this?"
I paused. I didn't answer immediately, because I wasn't sure how to.
"This is… a form of mental illness," they said gently.
The words hung in the air, soft but heavy, and for the first time, the weight I carried had a name.

And yet, as the night drifts on and sleep finally claims the body, the mind refuses to rest. It wanders, it questions, it remembers, it fears.
When the world falls silent and everyone else sleeps, that is when the mind becomes its own universe — strange, chaotic, and sometimes terrifying. In that quiet darkness, I began to wonder, when we all fall asleep, where do we go?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: When we all fall asleep, where do we go?

Some lines from songs disappear the moment the music stops. They sound beautiful while the melody is playing, but once the song ends, they slowly fade away like background noise. You hear them, you enjoy them, and then you forget them.
But some lines don't disappear.

Some lines stay.
They linger in your mind long after the song is over. They replay themselves when you're walking alone, when you're staring at the ceiling at night, or when your mind is quiet enough to hear your own thoughts.
One of those lines for me was a question.
"When we all fall asleep, where do we go?"

The first time I heard that line, it sounded mysterious. It felt like one of those poetic lyrics artists write simply to make a song sound deeper. I didn't stop to think about it too much at first.
But the strange thing about certain questions is that they slowly grow inside your mind.
The more you think about them, the heavier they become.
And that question stayed with me.
When we fall asleep, where do we actually go?

Physically, the answer is simple. Our bodies remain exactly where they are. On our beds. On a couch. On a chair. Wherever sleep finally finds us.
But our minds go somewhere else entirely.
Sleep is one of the strangest things humans experience. Our bodies shut down for rest, yet our minds remain active in a completely different way. During sleep, our thoughts are no longer controlled by logic the way they are during the day.

Dreams begin to form.
Sometimes dreams are beautiful. They take us to places that don't exist, places where impossible things suddenly feel real. In dreams, we can relive old memories, meet people we miss, or experience moments that feel happier than reality itself.
But dreams are not always peaceful.
Sometimes they become nightmares.
And sometimes the mind becomes the scariest place a person can visit.
Imagine someone lying in bed late at night. The room is quiet. The lights are off. The only sound in the room is the faint humming of a fan slowly spinning above their head.

Their body is exhausted.
They want to sleep.
But their mind refuses to rest.

They close their eyes and hope sleep will arrive quickly. For a moment, it seems like it will. Their breathing slows down. Their muscles relax.
Then a thought appears.
It starts small.

Maybe it's a memory of something embarrassing that happened years ago. Maybe it's a mistake they made earlier in the day. Maybe it's a conversation they wish had gone differently.
One thought leads to another.
Then another.
Suddenly their mind becomes crowded with questions.
Why did I say that?
What if people secretly think badly about me?
What if I fail?
What if everything goes wrong?

The quiet bedroom that once felt peaceful suddenly feels uncomfortable.
Not because there is a monster hiding in the room.
But because the mind itself has become the monster.
For most of our childhood, we were taught to fear imaginary things. Monsters under the bed. Creatures hiding in dark closets. Shadows that move when the lights go off.
But as we grow older, we begin to realize something important.
The real monsters were never under the bed.
They were always inside our minds.

The human mind is incredibly powerful. It can create happiness and excitement, but it can also create fear out of nothing. A simple thought can grow into anxiety. A small doubt can slowly become overwhelming insecurity.

One memory can replay itself repeatedly until it feels impossible to escape.
And the strangest part is that no one else can see it happening.
Someone might look completely calm on the outside while their mind feels like chaos on the inside.
Another scene.
It's two in the morning. The entire house is silent. Everyone else is asleep. The streets outside are empty. The world seems calm and peaceful.
But someone is lying awake, staring at the ceiling.
Their phone lights up the dark room as they scroll through social media, trying to distract themselves from their own thoughts.
They watch videos.
They read messages.
They scroll endlessly.
But the moment they finally put the phone down, the silence returns.
And with the silence, the thoughts return too.
Their mind begins replaying things they wish they could forget.
Old arguments.

Embarrassing moments.
Regrets.

Things people said that hurt more than they expected.
The mind doesn't care that it's late. It doesn't care that the body needs rest. It keeps digging through memories like someone searching through an old box of photographs.
Sometimes the mind even invents new fears.
What if tomorrow goes badly?
What if people secretly dislike me?
What if the future doesn't turn out the way I hope?
The darkness of the room makes those thoughts feel heavier than they should.

This is why that lyric stayed with me.
"When we all fall asleep, where do we go?"
Maybe the answer is that we go deeper into our own minds.
And sometimes the mind is not a comfortable place to visit.
It can be creative, imaginative, and beautiful. It can create dreams that feel magical and stories that inspire people. But it can also trap someone inside their own fears.

The mind has the ability to remind us of our happiest moments.
But it also remembers our worst ones.
It remembers every mistake we wish we could erase.
It remembers every moment we felt embarrassed, rejected, or misunderstood.
And sometimes it chooses to replay those moments when we least want to think about them.

That is why the mind can be the scariest place a person will ever face.
Not ghosts.
Not monsters.
Not darkness.
Just thoughts.
But there is another side to the mind as well.
The same mind that creates fear can also create strength.
The same mind that replays painful memories can also imagine better futures. It can create dreams, goals, ideas, and hope.
Thoughts are powerful, but they are not permanent.

Sometimes the hardest battles people fight are invisible ones. Quiet struggles that happen late at night while the rest of the world sleeps peacefully.
Battles that happen inside someone's mind.
And maybe that is why that question continues to echo in my head.

Because the lyrics are not only about sleep.
It is about the strange world that exists inside every human mind.
A world where dreams and fears live side by side.

A world where memories, imagination, anxiety, and hope all exist together.
So when we all fall asleep, where do we go?
Maybe the real answer is simpler than we think.
We go to the one place we can never escape.
Our own minds.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: Interlude II

Grief is supposed to look loud, at least, that's what people say. It's supposed to look like crying until your chest hurts, like screaming into pillows, like collapsing into someone's arms because the weight of loss is too heavy to carry alone.
But mine never looked like that, mine looked quiet, normal, looked like waking up every morning and checking my phone like nothing had changed.

The first thing I do when I wake up is open our chat. Your name is still pinned at the top, exactly where I left it. I never unpinned it. I never will.
Your last message is still there.
"Text me when you get home."

Sometimes I stare at that message longer than I should. Sometimes I read it over and over again as if the words might change if I look long enough.
They never do.
I never replied.
Not because I didn't want to.
I just thought there would be time.

That's the strange thing about time. You always think there will be more of it until suddenly there isn't.
People say acceptance is the final stage of grief. They talk about it like it's a destination you eventually reach, like a train station everyone arrives at sooner or later.

But what if you refuse to board the train?
What if you just… stay behind?
I still talk to you.
Not in a dramatic way. Not like the movies where someone breaks down crying while speaking to a photograph.
It's smaller than that.
Quieter.
Sometimes I'm walking down the street and I see something funny, and immediately the thought appears in my mind: I need to tell you this.

Sometimes I'm sitting in class and someone says something ridiculous, and I almost pull out my phone to text you about it.
Sometimes I actually do.
"Guess what happened today."
"You would not believe this."
"I saw someone wearing the ugliest shoes ever and immediately thought of you."

The messages sit there in the chat, unsent or unanswered. The little grey check mark never appears.
But I don't delete them.

Deleting them would feel like admitting something.
And I'm not ready to admit anything.
Your room still exists exactly the way you left it.

No one has really touched it. Your books are still on the shelf. Your hoodie is still draped over the chair. Your old headphones are still tangled on the desk the way you always left them.

Sometimes I walk in and sit on the edge of the bed.
"You should've seen today," I say.
And then I start talking.
I tell you everything. The boring parts, the funny parts, the things that annoyed me. I pause occasionally like I'm waiting for your response.

In my head, I can almost hear it.
Your sarcasm.
Your laugh.
The way you would roll your eyes at half the things I said.

It's strange how memories work. They don't feel like the past. They feel like echoes that never fully disappear.
Everyone else has started adjusting.
That's the part that confuses me the most.

People still mention your name sometimes, but not the way they used to.
At first, it was constant.
Stories about you. People crying. Long conversations about how unfair everything felt.
But slowly, the world moved on.
It always does.

Now when people say your name, it's softer. Careful. Like they're afraid it might break something fragile.
But nothing broke for me.
Because in my mind, you never left.
You're just somewhere else.
Busy.
Away.

That's the version of the story that makes the most sense.
One afternoon, someone tried to correct me.
I was telling a story about something you did last year, laughing halfway through the sentence.
"You should ask them about it when they get back," I said.

The room went quiet.
I noticed the silence immediately. Everyone was looking at me.
"What?" I asked.

One of them shifted uncomfortably in their chair.
“You know… they’re not coming back.”
I frowned.
“What do you mean?”

The words felt strange leaving my mouth.
Another silence followed. This one heavier than the first.
“They died,” someone said gently.
The sentence floated in the air like something fragile.
But it didn’t land.
Not really.
My mind rejected it instantly.
“No,” I said.

The word came out before I even thought about it.
“That’s not true.”
Later that night, I sat alone in my room staring at my phone again.

Our chat was still open.
Your last message stared back at me.
“Text me when you get home.”
I stared at the keyboard for a long time.
My fingers hovered above the screen.
For a moment, I almost typed something.
“I’m home.”
But I stopped.
Not because I suddenly believed what everyone was saying.

But because typing that message would mean acknowledging how much time had passed.
And I don’t want time to move forward without you.
So instead, I locked my phone and placed it beside me.
The room was quiet.
Too quiet.
I closed my eyes.
And that’s when I heard your voice.
“Still overthinking everything, huh?”
I froze.
The voice was so clear it felt like you were sitting right next to me.

I turned my head slowly.
The chair beside my bed was empty.
But the voice came again.
“You never change.”
My chest tightened.

For the first time in weeks—maybe months—something inside me cracked.
Because I finally understood something I had been refusing to see.

You weren't busy.
You weren't away.
You weren't coming back.
The voice I kept hearing… the conversations I kept having… the version of you that still lived in my mind…

None of it was real.
And the worst part wasn't that you were gone.
The worst part was realizing that somewhere along the way, I had stopped living in the same reality as everyone else.

The world said you died.
But my mind refused to bury you.
So it kept you alive instead.
Inside my thoughts.
Inside my memories.
Inside the quiet spaces where grief slowly turns into something darker.
And sometimes, late at night when the room is silent and my phone screen glows in the dark, I still hear your voice again.

Not as a memory.
But as if you never left.
And that's when the truth becomes impossible to ignore.
Losing you didn't just break my heart.
It broke my mind too.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: What happens when you fall in love.

There is a quiet shift that happens when you fall in love.
At first, it doesn't feel like anything has changed. Your life still looks the same from the outside. You still have your friends, your routines, your daily conversations, the same group chats that used to light up your phone every hour.
But somewhere in the middle of all that, your attention begins to move.

Not suddenly.
Slowly.
Almost gently.

You meet someone, and at first they're just another person in your life. Another conversation. Another number saved in your phone. But then the conversations start lasting longer. The replies start coming faster. The jokes start becoming personal.

And before you even realize it, they begin to take up space in your mind.
Your phone lights up with their name and something inside you shifts. You smile without realizing it. You read the message twice. You reply faster than you reply to anyone else.

At first, it feels harmless.
After all, falling in love is supposed to feel exciting.
It's supposed to feel consuming.
People even expect it to.
But the strange thing about love is that when it begins to grow, other parts of your life begin to quietly shrink.
Your friends are still there.
The group chat is still active.
But you don't notice the messages the same way anymore.
You open the chat, scroll quickly through the conversation, maybe react to a message, maybe send a short reply. But your attention isn't fully there.

Because you're waiting for something else.
You're waiting for them to text.
When their message arrives, everything else fades into the background.

The group chat becomes less important.
Your friends' stories become something you promise to read later.
And "later" slowly turns into hours.
Then days.
Then sometimes even longer.

Your friends might notice it.
They might say something jokingly.
“You’ve disappeared.”
“Love has finished you.”
And you laugh when they say it.

Because you know they’re not entirely wrong.
But you don’t think about it too deeply.
Inside your mind, you already have an explanation.

It’s fine.
You’re just in love.

That sentence becomes your quiet excuse for everything that begins to change.
When your friends plan something and you cancel because you want to spend time with your partner, you reassure yourself.

It’s fine. You’re just in love.

When your phone fills with messages in the group chat and you ignore them because you’re talking to that one person, you don’t feel guilty for long.

It’s fine. You’re just in love.

When someone asks why you haven’t been around lately, you shrug it off.
It’s fine. You’re just in love.
Love has a way of making everything feel justified.
It makes you believe the imbalance in your life is temporary.

It convinces you that everyone will understand.
After all, people fall in love every day.
It’s normal.
It’s expected.

And maybe you really do believe it’s temporary.
Maybe you tell yourself that once things settle down, you’ll reconnect with everyone the way you used to.
But the problem with distance is that it grows quietly.
Friendships don’t usually disappear overnight.
They fade slowly.

In small, barely noticeable moments.
The calls become less frequent.
The conversations become shorter.
The spontaneous hangouts stop happening.

The inside jokes slowly stop updating.
And the people who once felt like permanent parts of your everyday life begin to exist somewhere in the background.

Meanwhile, you're still in love.
Your world feels full.
Your attention feels exactly where you want it to be.
So when you notice the distance between you and your friends, you reassure yourself again.

It's fine.
You're just in love.
The strange thing about this phase is that you don't always realize how much has changed until much later.
Sometimes months pass before you pause long enough to notice something different.

The group chat that once felt alive now feels quiet.
The people you used to talk to every day now only appear occasionally.
The conversations that used to feel effortless now feel slightly unfamiliar.

And that's when the realization slowly begins to appear.
Love was never the problem.
The problem was believing that love was the only relationship that deserved your attention.
Because love should add to your life.

Not replace the people who were already there.
Those friendships existed before the romance began.
They were there before the late-night calls with someone new.

Before the constant messages.
Before the feeling of excitement that comes with discovering someone you care deeply about.
They were there when your world looked completely different.

And the truth is, falling in love doesn't mean you have to slowly disappear from those friendships.
It just means your life has expanded.
But when someone convinces themselves that neglecting their friends is acceptable because they're in love, they slowly begin to shrink their world without even realizing it.

And the excuse always sounds the same.
Simple.
Comforting.
Easy to repeat.
It's fine.
You're just in love.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: “I'm going through a lot” is not an apology.

The first time it happened, I convinced myself it wasn’t a big deal.

People make mistakes all the time. People say things they don’t mean. People forget. People get overwhelmed. Life happens. I understood that.
So when the message came and the explanation followed, I told myself to be patient.
“I’m going through a lot right now.”
That sentence sat on my screen like a full stop at the end of a conversation that hadn’t even begun.

At first, I accepted it, maybe too quickly, because the truth is, when someone says they’re struggling, the last thing you want to do is make their life harder. You don’t want to look insensitive, you don’t want to appear like the person who only cares about themselves while someone else is dealing with problems.

So I ignored the small discomfort sitting in my chest and I told myself it didn’t matter.
But the problem with unspoken hurt is that it doesn’t disappear. It just waits.

The situation that led to that conversation wasn’t even dramatic. There were no screaming matches or explosive arguments. It was quieter than that. The kind of situation that only hurts deeply because you expected better.

I remember the moment clearly.
We had been talking earlier that day, the conversation flowing normally. Nothing unusual, nothing that suggested things were about to change. At least not to me.
Then something happened, something small at first, but heavy enough to leave a mark.

Words were said, actions were taken, things that made me pause and think, Did that really just happen?
For a while, I didn’t say anything.
Not because I didn’t want to.
But because I was trying to understand.
Sometimes when someone hurts you, your first reaction isn’t anger. It’s confusion. You replay the moment in your head again and again, trying to figure out if maybe you misunderstood something.

Maybe they didn’t mean it like that.
Maybe you’re overreacting.
Maybe you’re reading too much into it.
But eventually, the feeling didn’t go away.
And when feelings refuse to leave, they start demanding to be acknowledged.

So I decided to say something.
Not in an aggressive way. Not in a way meant to start a fight. Just honestly.

I explained how what happened made me feel. I explained why it bothered me. I wasn't looking for a perfect explanation or a long speech.
Just something simple.
Acknowledgement.
Maybe even an apology.
Instead, the response came quickly.
"I'm going through a lot right now."
That was it.
No pause.
No "I'm sorry."
Just that sentence.

For a moment, I stared at the screen, unsure how to respond. It felt like the entire conversation had been quietly redirected. The focus had moved away from what happened and toward something else entirely.
Their struggles.
Their problems.
Their situation.

And suddenly I felt guilty for even bringing the issue up in the first place.
That's the strange power that sentence has.
It makes you question yourself.
It makes you wonder if maybe you're being unfair for expecting accountability from someone who is already dealing with their own battles.
So I did what many people do in moments like that.
I said nothing.

I let the conversation end there.
Days passed.
Then weeks.
On the surface, everything seemed normal again. Conversations resumed. Messages were exchanged. Life continued the way it always had.

But something had changed inside me.
Not dramatically. Not loudly.
Just quietly.
There was now a small space between us that hadn't been there before.
Because even though I tried to move on, the memory of that moment stayed in my mind.

Not because I wanted to hold onto it.
But because it felt unfinished.
Every now and then, the thought would return.
Was I wrong for expecting an apology?
The more I thought about it, the more I realized something important.

Going through a lot might explain someone's behavior.
But it doesn't erase its impact.
If someone accidentally drops a heavy bag on your foot, explaining that they were distracted might help you understand why it happened.

But they would still say sorry.
Because the pain still happened.
Because acknowledging the hurt matters.
The same logic applies to emotional hurt.
People can be overwhelmed. They can be stressed. They can be struggling with things they don't talk about.
But those struggles do not erase the effects of their actions.

Understanding someone's situation and holding them accountable are not mutually exclusive.
Both can exist at the same time.
One evening, I found myself thinking about that conversation again.

Not because I wanted to hold onto resentment, but because I was trying to understand something deeper.
Why is it so hard for people to apologize?
Why is it easier to explain pain than to acknowledge the pain you caused?

The more I thought about it, the clearer the answer became.
Apologizing requires vulnerability.
It requires admitting that you were wrong.
It requires facing the possibility that your actions affected someone else in a negative way.

And for many people, that level of honesty feels uncomfortable.
So instead, they offer explanations.
Explanations that shift the focus away from responsibility.
Explanations that quietly end conversations before accountability enters the room.

"I'm going through a lot."
It sounds heavy.
It sounds real.
And sometimes, it absolutely is.
But when it replaces an apology instead of accompanying one, it becomes something else entirely.

A shield.
A way to escape the uncomfortable moment where someone has to say, "I'm sorry."
That realization didn't make me angry.
If anything, it made me more aware.
More aware of the difference between empathy and self-neglect.

Because caring about someone's struggles should not require ignoring your own feelings.

And expecting accountability should not make you feel like the villain in someone else's story.
Looking back now, I understand that moment differently.
Not as a fight that was never resolved.
But as a quiet lesson.

A lesson about how people handle responsibility.
A lesson about how easily conversations can shift away from accountability.
And most importantly, a lesson about what a real apology actually looks like.
A real apology doesn't erase someone's struggles.
It simply acknowledges that those struggles don't justify hurting others.

It sounds like this:
"I'm sorry for what happened."
"I shouldn't have handled that the way I did."
"I know you were hurt, and I regret that."
Simple.
Honest.
Human.
Because in the end, understanding someone's pain is important.

But so is acknowledging the pain you caused.
And no matter how heavy someone's struggles may be, one thing remains true.
"I'm going through a lot" might explain behavior.
But it will never replace the apology someone deserved to hear.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT: Me and my music taste against the world.

Music has always been a very personal thing. Not the kind of "personal" that you casually talk about with everyone, but the kind that quietly lives inside your headphones, inside your playlists, inside those late-night moments where a song somehow understands what you're feeling better than people do.
For some people, music is just background noise. Something to play in the car. Something to fill silence when the room becomes too quiet. Something that exists, but doesn't necessarily mean anything.

But for others, music is different.It becomes a mirror, a diary. Sometimes even a safe place.
And that's exactly what it has always been for me.
If there's one thing about my music taste, it's that it's very clear—I love pop music, not just casually. I mean the kind of love where a song can stay on repeat for hours because the lyrics hit in a way that feels almost too accurate. The kind of music where you pause for a second and think, "wait… how did they know this?" The kind where one line can stay in your head all day, not because it's catchy, but because it feels true.

Because if there is one thing I always look for in a song, it is the lyrics. The lyrics have to make sense, they have to feel real, they have to feel relatable.
A song can have the best beat in the world, but if the words don't carry meaning, I probably won't connect with it. I might listen once, maybe twice, but it won't stay. It won't become one of those songs I return to when I need to feel something.

And that's why I'm very picky with the music I listen to.
Because for me, music is not just about sound. It's about connection. It's about hearing something and thinking, "this is exactly what I've been trying to say but didn't have the words for."

And yes, this is usually the part where people get surprised when I say something that might sound a little controversial.
I genuinely don't connect with a lot of Nigerian songs.
Not all of them, but a good number of them. And before it sounds like I'm trying to be different or unpatriotic, that's not it at all. It's not about where the music is coming from. It's about what the music is saying.

Because sometimes I listen to certain songs and I genuinely wonder what the lyrics are supposed to mean.
What exactly am I meant to feel?
What am I meant to relate to?
Music, to me, should say something. It should express something. It should tell a story or capture a feeling that people can connect to.

But sometimes, the lyrics I hear feel empty. Like they're just words put together because they sound good, not because they actually mean anything. And when the meaning is missing, the connection disappears.

And once the connection is gone, the song doesn't stay.
It just becomes noise.
That's why my playlists are mostly filled with artists from outside Nigeria, especially American artists. Not because foreign music is automatically better, but because many of those artists focus heavily on storytelling.

They write about emotions.
About heartbreak.
About growing up.
About insecurities.
About mental struggles.
About the kind of things people actually go through.
And those are the songs that stay with me.
Those are the songs that feel like conversations.
If you've ever looked at my playlists, one name you would definitely see there is Billie Eilish.
At this point, my love for Billie is not even something I try to hide.

Her music has a way of diving deep into emotions that many people don't talk about openly. Her songs don't pretend everything is fine. They sit in the discomfort. They explore the darker parts of the mind—the quiet fears, the overthinking, the things that show up when you're alone at night and there's no distraction left.

And there's something about that kind of honesty that stays with you.
It feels real.
It feels human.
But Billie isn't the only artist I connect with. There's also Lana Del Rey.
Listening to Lana feels like stepping into a movie. Her music is slow, dramatic, emotional, almost poetic. The kind of songs that don't rush you, they pull you in slowly and make you feel everything all at once.

And then there's RAYE.
RAYE's music feels raw in a different way. There's a kind of honesty in her lyrics that doesn't try to soften anything. It just says things as they are. Sometimes beautifully, sometimes painfully, but always truthfully.
These are the kinds of artists I resonate with.
Artists who understand that music is more than just sound.
It's storytelling.
It's emotion.
It's connection.
But loving this kind of music has also come with something else—judgment.
And not always in a loud, confrontational way. Sometimes it's subtle. A comment here. A look there. A random "you and this your music taste."
And I get it.
Not everyone listens to music the same way.

For some people, music is just vibes. Something to dance to. Something to enjoy in the moment and move on from. And there's nothing wrong with that.
But for me, it has always been deeper than that.
Music is something I sit with.
Something I think about.
Something I return to, over and over again, because it captures something I don't want to lose.
It reminds me of moments.
Of feelings.
Of versions of myself I might have forgotten.
And maybe that's why I care so much about what I listen to.
Because the kind of music you choose becomes part of your life in a quiet way.
It shapes your mood.
It reflects your thoughts.
It stays with you long after the song has ended.
So yes, my playlists look the way they do.
Pop music.
Honest lyrics.

Songs that feel like conversations instead of just noise.
And maybe it won't make sense to everyone.
Maybe some people will never understand why I'd choose a slow, emotional song over something more energetic. Maybe some people will always think I'm doing too much or overthinking it.
But at the end of the day, music is personal.
It belongs to the listener.
And for me, it has never just been about what sounds good.
It's about what feels real.
So if it ever feels like it's me and my music taste against the world…
I think I'm perfectly okay with that.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE: Breaking News: I ignored the red flags.

Breaking news: I ignored the red flags. And not small, subtle ones either. I'm talking about giant, neon, screaming, flashing warnings that were practically tap-dancing in front of my face, and somehow, I treated them like confetti at a party—cute, decorative, and completely ignorable.

Her name was Lila, and from the very first moment, she had this magnetic, chaotic energy that made you feel like life suddenly had a soundtrack. Funny, smart, unpredictable—she could make the most ordinary day feel like a movie scene. And of course, I fell for it. Immediately, completely, blindly. The tiny voice in my head that whispered, maybe something's off, I silenced. I told myself I was just imagining things.

Who listens to a little voice anyway? It's like a pop-up ad—you see it, you ignore it, and you move on with your life.
It started with her disappearing whenever she needed space—but only my space. She would call, text, or appear when she wanted notes from class, a venting session, or someone to hype her up.

But the moment I had something I needed—a simple check-in, a shoulder, a plan I wanted to share—she vanished. I don't mean subtly vanished. I mean ghost-level disappeared, like Houdini had taken up part-time residence in her life. And me? I rationalized it. Maybe she's stressed. Maybe she's busy. Maybe I did something wrong. All excuses, all denial. I didn't see a red flag; I saw an opportunity to practice patience and emotional strength.

And then there were the ways she treated everyone else. People outside my bubble, people who weren't me—gone. Friends she had for years? Gone. A stranger who said one wrong word? Gone. Lila had this uncanny ability to make everyone else feel disposable, and somehow I convinced myself it didn't matter because she smiled at me and occasionally said something sweet. I'm the exception, I thought.

I was safe. Safe from the chaos, the unpredictability, the reality of who she actually was. Safe from seeing the truth.
But the inconsistencies piled up, slowly and relentlessly. One day she was attentive, warm, funny, charming. The next, distant, cold, unreachable. Messages ignored, plans canceled, energy shifted. I invented excuses for every shift: Maybe she's having a bad day. Maybe she's tired. Maybe I offended her somehow.

Anything to keep the illusion alive. Patterns were there, visible and glaring, but I refused to acknowledge them. Instead, I chose comfort. The comfort of believing that life was still cinematic, that the story was still unfolding the way I wanted it to.

Then there was my gut. That voice that should have been my GPS through this mess. Every time she spoke, every time she disappeared, every time I felt that uncomfortable, queasy little pit in my stomach,

my gut was screaming at me. Stop! Pay attention! This isn't right! But I muted it, brushed it off. Told myself I was overthinking, that I was just dramatic, that I needed to give her the benefit of the doubt.
I ignored the most reliable warning system I had because the story felt too good to ruin.

And, of course, everyone else saw it. My friends. The ones who actually noticed what I refused to. "I don't trust her." "Something about her feels off." "Be careful." And me? I waved them off, like I was some brilliant, untouchable oracle. You don't understand. It's different for me. The arrogance of hope, the audacity of belief. I ignored the world's obvious signals and trusted… nothing but what I wanted to see.

At first, ignoring all this didn't feel bad. It felt thrilling, exciting, funny even. I laughed at my own paranoia, joked about my overthinking, told everyone it was just part of the "story." The first weeks were cinematic: late-night conversations, inside jokes, shared secrets, adventures that felt like scenes straight out of a teen drama. It was fun. It was intoxicating. And yet, every week, every day, tiny cracks began forming in the picture-perfect version of Lila I had crafted in my head.

I ignored those cracks. I rationalized them, argued with myself. I told myself that this was normal, that everyone had bad days, that inconsistency was human. And then slowly, the confetti I had been so distracted by turned into alarms. Missed calls became ghosting, small lies became patterns of dishonesty, excitement became unpredictability. The jokes stopped landing. The charm faded. And I realized, in the quiet moments when the energy drained out of the conversation, that the warnings had been there all along.

Seeing the red flags is different from acting on them. I had seen them. Everyone else had seen them. My gut had screamed at me. But I ignored them. I laughed at them. I convinced myself they didn't apply to me. And the truth is, it wasn't bravery. It wasn't hope. It wasn't optimism. It was denial, and denial has a cost.

The cost isn't always dramatic. It isn't always a headline-grabbing disaster. Sometimes it's disappointment, exhaustion, the slow erosion of trust, the gnawing awareness that you were warned but refused to listen. That's what I learned. That's what the story of me and Lila taught me: the red flags are real, loud, obvious, and unavoidable—but seeing them isn't enough. The only way to survive them is to acknowledge them, listen, and act.

I ignored the red flags and yes, it hurt. Yes, I learned, I will pay attention next time. Maybe.
But even after all that, I can't help but wonder—what happens when you see the red flags, you listen, and still take everything personally? That's a story for next time.

CHAPTER THIRTY: Jsyk, The aftermath hits hard.

Sometimes, seeing the red flags isn't enough, acting on them isn't enough either. Sometimes, the real chaos only starts after you realize everything you ignored, every emotion you overthought, every tiny misstep you personalized, and every warning you chose to laugh off has caught up to you.

After I ignored the red flags, after I let my instincts be silenced, and after I took everything personally, I thought I had reached the end of the story. I thought the universe would at least pause for a moment and let me catch my breath. Spoiler: it didn't. Instead, the aftermath hit like a slow-motion avalanche—quiet at first, then relentless, and impossible to ignore.

It started with her. Lila, or rather, the memory of her. The traces of her presence that lingered everywhere. A group chat pinged, and I instinctively looked for her name. A joke was shared, and I imagined her laughing at it, somewhere, without me. Even mundane things—the cafeteria table she once sat at, the corner of the library where we laughed too loudly—suddenly became symbols. Symbols of moments that should have been simple, innocent, and fun, but now felt heavy, weighty and toxic and worst of all, entirely my fault.

I started replaying everything in my mind, like a detective obsessively combing through evidence that pointed only to me. Every missed message, every silence, every small shift in behavior was cataloged, scrutinized, and stored. I wondered: did I ignore her signs? Did I misunderstand her entirely? Could I have stopped this before it became… this?

The truth was brutal. I hadn't just ignored the red flags. I had willingly stepped into the storm. I had allowed my excitement, my hope, my imagination, and my attachment to blind me to reality.

Every inconsistency, every disappearance, every trace of selfishness—yes, they were all there. I saw them. I laughed at them. I told myself they were normal. And now, looking back, I realized how deep the rabbit hole went.

The aftermath didn't just live in my head, though. It crept into my daily life. I became hyper-aware of people's behavior, not because I was suddenly wise, but because I was terrified of being blindsided again. Every interaction with someone else was now filtered through the lens of Lila. Was she going to ghost me? Ignore me? Make me feel invisible? Even new friendships became complicated, because my trust muscles were atrophied. I couldn't just meet someone and assume good intentions anymore. I had to test, watch, wait, interpret, decode.

And taking things personally? That didn't help. Every word, every glance, every joke I overheard in the hallways or online made my stomach tighten. If someone laughed in the group chat, I automatically wondered if I had done something wrong. If a friend didn't respond quickly, I imagined myself being replaced. Taking things personally had evolved into a full-time

occupation, and the irony was that no one had actually done anything to hurt me. It was all in my interpretation, fueled by the chaos I had stepped into and ignored.

Then came the sleep-deprived nights, replaying moments like a looped movie I couldn't pause. Scenes that were insignificant in reality became pivotal battles in my mind. I questioned everything about myself. My worth. My judgment. My ability to recognize people and their intentions. And all because I had allowed myself to be swept into a story that I refused to question while it was happening.

I started noticing patterns in others, too. Every time someone said something minor, my first instinct wasn't neutral or calm—it was: are they like Lila? Are they going to disappear? Are they going to hurt me without even trying? Trust became fragile. Friendships required invisible contracts I didn't verbalize. I was scanning for red flags in everyone I interacted with. And somewhere, deep down, I knew it was exhausting and unfair, but I couldn't stop.

Humor was the only thing keeping me sane. I laughed at my overthinking. I laughed at my obsessive cataloging of behaviors. I laughed at my own paranoia. Sometimes, in the middle of a crowded lecture hall, I would start imagining ridiculous scenarios that had nothing to do with reality and chuckle quietly to myself. It was absurd, yes. But it was also survival. Humor became my lifeboat.

But even humor had limits. I realized I couldn't keep living like this forever. I couldn't ignore the fact that the chaos, the pain, the obsessive thoughts, and the personalized slights were all connected. That they were the aftermath of ignoring what I knew to be true, and internalizing everything as if it were my fault. That the red flags I laughed at had consequences, real ones, emotional ones. psychological ones even.

The strongest realization of all? The aftermath doesn't just affect your relationship with someone else. It affects your relationship with yourself. It changes how you see your own judgment, your own instincts, and your own ability to trust your perceptions. I had learned in the hardest way possible that ignoring reality and personalizing everything is a combination that will haunt you long after the immediate chaos is over.

I began to rebuild slowly. I reminded myself that not everything is personal, that instincts are there for a reason, and that ignoring warnings only creates longer-term consequences. I realized that it's okay to step back, to breathe, and to reassess. That sometimes, the world isn't conspiring against you—it's just indifferent. And sometimes, you have to learn to navigate that indifference with care and awareness.

The aftermath is real, persistent, and unavoidable if you choose to ignore the signals along the way. But surviving it? That's the lesson. Understanding it? That's growth. And knowing that you can emerge on the other side, cautious but wiser, more aware but still capable of hope—that's the headline we should all aim for.

And even as I learned to rebuild, to trust cautiously, and to take things less personally, I couldn't shake the sense that the next story was already waiting for me. That even with all my lessons, life had more lessons lined up—lessons about love, music, trust, and the chaos of growing up in a world that constantly tests you.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE: Anyway…….moving on.

Anyway… moving on. People say that phrase so casually, like it's just a polite way to end a conversation. Someone tells a long story, the room gets awkwardly quiet, and then someone clears their throat and says, "Anyway… moving on." Suddenly we're talking about something else, like the previous topic never existed. It sounds clean, efficient, Emotionally mature even, but the truth is, half the time people say "moving on," they are absolutely not moving on. Not even close.

They're just pretending to move on while their brain secretly opens twenty tabs about the same situation. And yes, I know this because I have been that person. The "anyway… moving on" person who says the phrase confidently and then spends the next hour thinking about the exact thing they claimed they had moved on from. Moving on sounds simple in theory.

People love giving advice like it's the easiest thing in the world. "Just move on." As if your brain is a phone app you can swipe closed. As if emotions come with a neat little exit button that says tap here to heal immediately. If that were the case, life would be extremely efficient. Someone hurts you? Click. Memory deleted. Someone disappoints you? Click. Emotional update installed. Situation resolved.

Unfortunately, the human brain does not work like that. The human brain works more like a suspicious detective who refuses to close a case. It keeps returning to the same moment over and over again. "But what did they mean by that?" "Why did they say it like that?" "Did I misunderstand something?" Suddenly you're analyzing a three-second interaction like it's evidence in a courtroom drama. I once said "anyway… moving on" about something that had happened weeks earlier. I said it confidently too, the way people do when they want to sound emotionally evolved. I told my friend, "Honestly, I'm over it now. I don't even think about it anymore."

That sentence aged very badly, because later that same night I caught myself rereading an old conversation like I was studying ancient scrolls. You would think I was preparing for a history exam with the way I was analyzing those messages. Apparently my version of "moving on" meant revisiting the situation with the curiosity of a scientist studying rare artifacts. And this is where things get funny, because everyone does some version of this.

Someone says they've moved on, but then they randomly bring up the situation again two days later. "Oh yeah, remember that thing I said I didn't care about anymore? Yeah, I thought about it again." Or someone says they don't care, but you notice they somehow know every update about the person involved.

That's when you realize something very important about humans: we are excellent at pretending to move on while secretly keeping the entire situation stored in high definition memory. But moving on isn't just about people. Sometimes it's about situations, expectations, or even versions of yourself. There are moments in life that linger longer than they should. Conversations that replay in your head like a song stuck on repeat. Decisions you question even months later. Little details that seem unimportant to everyone else but somehow refuse to leave your mind. And the funny thing is that your brain doesn't

warn you when it's about to revisit them. You'll just be living your life normally—eating, walking, scrolling, minding your business—and suddenly your mind goes, "Hey remember that slightly awkward moment from three months ago?" And just like that, you're mentally transported back to a situation you thought you had already left behind.

It's almost impressive how creative the brain can be when it comes to revisiting old things. Sometimes you'll even invent new interpretations of the same memory. At first you thought someone was annoyed with you. Then later you think maybe they were just tired. Then later you wonder if you were the annoying one. Your brain keeps rewriting the story like it's a movie director experimenting with different endings. Meanwhile the other person probably forgot the moment existed five minutes after it happened. That realization alone is both comforting and slightly embarrassing. Because it means you've been dedicating entire mental documentaries to situations that nobody else remembers. And yet, this is part of the strange process of moving on.

It doesn't happen in one dramatic moment. It happens gradually, almost invisibly. At first the memory feels heavy. It shows up constantly. It interrupts your thoughts like an uninvited guest who refuses to leave the party. Then slowly it starts appearing less often. You don't notice the change immediately. It just happens.

One day you realize you haven't thought about the situation all day. Then a week passes without it showing up. Then when it finally does appear again, it feels different. Distant somehow. Like you're remembering something that happened to a slightly different version of yourself. That's the quiet side of moving on that people don't talk about enough. Moving on isn't always dramatic. Sometimes it's just growing out of a situation.

The emotions fade because your life fills up with other things. New conversations. New memories. New people. New distractions. And before you realize it, the thing that once occupied so much space in your mind has quietly been pushed to the background. The memory still exists, but it doesn't carry the same weight anymore. It becomes a story rather than an emotional crisis. Something you can laugh about instead of overanalyzing.

And sometimes you really do reach a point where you say "anyway… moving on," and this time it isn't a performance. It isn't a dramatic declaration meant to convince people that you're healed. It's just a simple acknowledgment that you've outgrown something. That the situation no longer deserves the same amount of energy it once did. That you're done replaying it in your head because life has moved forward whether you were ready or not. That's the funny part about moving on.

When you're in the middle of a situation, it feels huge. Like it will always matter that much. Like you'll always remember every detail and feel the same emotions when you think about it. But time has a way of shrinking things. Moments that once felt enormous slowly become smaller. Not because they weren't real, but because you kept living your life after them. You kept changing. You kept growing. And the version of you that experienced that moment eventually becomes someone slightly different. Someone who looks back and thinks, "Wow, I really spent a lot of energy on that."

And then you laugh a little. Not in a mean way, but in a kind of understanding way. Because that version of you didn't know what you know now. They were just reacting to what they felt at the time. And that's okay. That's part of the process. So yes, people say "anyway… moving on" for many reasons. Sometimes it's to escape an awkward conversation. Sometimes it's to pretend something doesn't bother them anymore. Sometimes it's said with dramatic confidence even though the speaker will absolutely think about the situation again later that night.

But every once in a while, someone says those words and actually means them. Not because they erased the memory. Not because they forced themselves to forget. But because they've reached the point where the memory doesn't control their thoughts anymore. And that's when moving on finally becomes real. Quiet. Unannounced.

Almost casual. The kind of moving on where you don't need to convince anyone—including yourself. You just say the words and continue living your life.

Anyway… moving on.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO: !!!!!!!!!!!!!

My brain is a very interesting place.
Not peaceful. Not calm. Not organized.
Interesting.
There are people who say their minds are quiet. They say things like, “I just clear my thoughts and relax.” I don’t know what that means. I have never once in my life cleared my thoughts. If anything, my thoughts clear me. They escorted me out of whatever calm moment I was enjoying and replaced it with chaos.

One moment I’m sitting peacefully, minding my business, existing like a normal human being.
The next moment my brain goes:
“Remember that awkward thing you said three years ago?”
And suddenly we’re there again. The same scene. Same conversation. Same embarrassment. Except now my brain has added dramatic music and a narrator explaining how cringe I was.

The funny part is that nobody else remembers these things. I could walk up to the person involved and say, “Do you remember when I said that weird thing in 2021?” and they’d probably stare at me like I’m describing a dream they were never part of.

But my brain? Oh, my brain remembers everything. It stores awkward moments like they’re national treasures.
!!!!!!!!!
Another favorite activity of my brain is post-message analysis.
You send a text.
Just a normal text.
Something harmless like “okay”.
And immediately your brain goes:
Wait.
Was that too dry?
Should I have said “okay!” instead?
Or maybe “okayyy”?
What about “okay :)”?
Now they think I’m mad.
Now they think I’m rude.
Now they think I secretly hate them.
Now they’re telling their friends about how aggressive my “okay” sounded.

Should I send another message explaining that my “okay” was emotionally neutral?
But if I send another message that will look suspicious.
Now I look desperate.
Now I look insane.
!!!!!!!!!

Then there's the 2 a.m. philosophy hour.
This is when my brain suddenly decides it's time to think about life.
Not small life questions either.
Huge ones.
What am I doing with my life?
Where will I be in five years?
Did I choose the right path?
Am I becoming the person I thought I would be?
Also… why do mosquitoes exist?
Important questions. Life-changing questions. Questions that absolutely could have waited until morning but decided to arrive in the middle of the night instead.
The problem with these thoughts is that they show up when I'm trying to sleep. My brain turns into a motivational speaker, a philosopher, and a conspiracy theorist all at the same time.

Sleep is canceled. Overthinking has begun.
!!!!!!!!!
Sometimes the chaos is smaller.
Like walking away from a conversation and suddenly wondering if I sounded weird.
Did I talk too much?
Did I laugh too loudly?
Did that joke actually make sense?
Did they laugh because it was funny or because they felt bad for me?

Now I'm analyzing their laughter.
Why did their laugh have a pause in it?
What does the pause mean?
Is the pause a bad sign?
I have now spent ten minutes thinking about a laugh.
!!!!!!!!!
Being an overthinker means your brain is basically a detective who solves crimes that never happened.
Every tiny detail becomes evidence.
Someone replies late.
Evidence.
Someone uses a different tone.
Evidence.
Someone says "alright."
My brain immediately goes:
Why did they say it like that?
There are a thousand possible explanations for everything, and my brain insists on exploring all of them.
At once.

!!!!!!!!!
The funniest part is that while my brain is doing all this dramatic thinking, the rest of the world is completely calm.

People are eating.
People are laughing.
People are living their lives peacefully.
Meanwhile my brain is inside like:
ALERT.
ANALYSIS REQUIRED.
EMOTIONAL INVESTIGATION IN PROGRESS.
!!!!!!!!!

Sometimes I wish I could borrow the brain of someone who doesn't overthink.
Just for one day.
I imagine their thoughts are simple.
"Nice weather today."
"Food tastes good."
"Time to sleep."
Meanwhile my brain is running a full emotional documentary with twenty subplots and dramatic background music.

!!!!!!!!!
But here's the strange thing.
Even with all the chaos, all the noise, all the unnecessary thinking… this brain is still mine.
It worries too much.
It analyzes too much.
It remembers things that don't matter anymore.
But it also notices things.
It reflects.
It learns.
It grows.
Even if it does all those things very loudly.

!!!!!!!!!
Some people say the solution is simple.
"Don't overthink."
Which is very funny advice.
That's like telling the ocean not to be wet.
My brain will think.
Probably too much.
Probably about things that don't deserve that much attention.
Probably at the worst possible time.
But eventually the noise settles.
Eventually the chaos quiets down.
Eventually the thoughts were slow enough for me to breathe again.

Until the next wave of thoughts arrives.

Which it definitely will.
Because this brain?
Yeah.
It's a little dramatic.
!!!!!!!!!
And honestly…
I wouldn't have it any other way.
(Well… maybe slightly less dramatic.)
But still.
!!!!!!!!!

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE: Plot twist: Life goes on

Turns out, life doesn't actually explode the way my brain expects it to. You'd think after every awkward conversation, every tiny misstep, every overanalyzed text, the world would end. You'd think everything would collapse like a poorly stacked Jenga tower. But here's the weird truth: it doesn't. People keep laughing. Time keeps moving. And somehow, despite all the chaos, despite all the moments I was certain were catastrophic, I am still here. Not only that… things have a way of turning out better than I expected. The conversations I thought I ruined? They barely mattered. The embarrassing moments I relived for months? Forgotten by everyone else. The fears I built into towering monsters? Mostly imaginary. Life… goes on.

I remember a time when I thought failing a test would end everything. I studied for weeks, obsessed over every formula, memorized every word in the notes, convinced myself that if I didn't score perfectly, everyone would know I wasn't "enough." When the results came, I didn't even pass by my own ridiculous expectations. And yet, here I am. Nobody laughed at me. Nobody told me I had failed as a human being. In fact, most people forgot entirely. I realized then that all the weight I carried on my shoulders was created by my own imagination. That's when I started noticing a pattern: the things that feel like the end of the world in the moment? They almost never are.

Falling out with friends, worrying about grades, panicking over what someone might think about you—all of it seems massive until you step back. Time has this way of shrinking problems without anyone noticing. You look back six months later and realize, "Wait… I was stressed about that? That thing that felt like a hurricane?" Life has this unannounced ability to move forward, even when you're convinced you're stuck. And maybe that's the real plot twist. The world doesn't pause for our worries. It doesn't wait for us to figure it all out. It just… keeps going. You keep going.

There was a time when I thought a friendship ending would destroy me. When someone drifted away, I felt like a part of my identity disappeared with them. I imagined that this gap would never close, that my world would always feel incomplete, that every future memory would have a missing corner where they once belonged. But slowly, almost imperceptibly, I found the gaps filling in again. New friendships, new experiences, little moments of laughter. Life doesn't replace people, but it adapts. And sometimes, it teaches you that the absence of someone doesn't have to feel like a hole in your soul—it can be a space where growth sneaks in quietly.

And the funny part is, most of this growth happens while you're not paying attention. You wake up one morning, and suddenly you notice that you're more patient, stronger, more resilient. You're calmer in situations that used to trigger panic. You don't care as much about approval as you once did. You realize that all those nights spent worrying, overthinking, re-living every awkward moment, all of it shaped you without you noticing. Life moves on, yes, but it doesn't leave you behind either. It carries you forward, even when you feel like you're stuck in the mud.

It's still chaotic, of course. Life is messy. Unexpected things happen. People hurt you, situations spiral, you lose track of the plan you thought you had. But even in the chaos, even in the moments you think

you'll break, you don't. You bend, you twist, you survive. And there's a strange, quiet satisfaction in realizing that you are stronger than you thought, wiser than you realized, and capable of handling far more than you expected.

Sometimes, life even surprises you in hilarious ways. Remember that person who annoyed you endlessly last semester? Turns out, they weren't as important as you imagined. Remember that panic over an exam that felt impossible? You passed anyway, probably without even realizing you'd done your best. Remember that text you overanalyzed for three days straight? They didn't even notice it existed. Life has a way of tricking us into thinking everything matters, then slowly showing us that some things were never worth the energy in the first place.

And the truly beautiful part is that moving on doesn't always require dramatic declarations. It doesn't need grand statements or speeches to the universe. Sometimes it's just quiet. A small realization that the weight you carried for months is lighter now. That the storm you feared so much has passed, and the sky is just… clearer. And yes, there are still clouds, but you know how to walk under them without being drenched.

You realize that the version of yourself who panicked over everything, who replayed conversations, who spiraled over tiny mistakes, that version is still there, but they are quieter now. They don't scream as loudly. They observe instead of reacting. They learn instead of catastrophizing. And sometimes, they even laugh at themselves for how dramatic they used to be.

So, after all the panic, the awkwardness, the sleepless nights spent overthinking every little thing, the moment you understand that life actually moves on is liberating. It's a quiet exhale, a soft laugh at the absurdity of it all, a recognition that even when it felt like everything was falling apart, everything was… exactly as it should be. And maybe the biggest twist of all is that life didn't stop for you to figure it out. You just had to keep moving.

And that's the plot twist: life goes on. Even when you thought you couldn't. Even when you thought it would break you. Even when you expected everything to collapse. Life moves forward. Time keeps ticking. And somehow, so do you. Stronger, a little wiser, a little braver, maybe even a little more confident that the next chaotic chapter will arrive, and you'll still make it through. Because life is relentless, stubborn, and beautiful that way.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR: Anyways, thank you for listening.

Anyway… thank you for listening. Not in the "oh, you nodded while I rambled" kind of way, but in the way that matters. In the way that makes this feel like we're sitting across from each other, sharing late-night thoughts over a drink, or maybe texting endlessly in a group chat that only exists in our heads. Thank you for letting me spill all of this—my chaos, my overthinking, my heartbreaks, my victories, my music obsessions, my friendships, my tiny dramatic moments that somehow felt monumental—and just… listening.

It's strange, isn't it? How much we hold inside, how many things we think nobody will ever understand, and yet, when you finally write them down—or say them out loud—it's like someone finally handed you the key to your own head. You realize, oh… this is why I panic, this is why I laugh too loudly, this is why I overthink texts at 2 a.m., this is why my music taste is a full-blown personality trait, this is why I get carried away by friendships, crushes, heartbreaks, and random existential thoughts all at once. And maybe, just maybe, it's not as crazy as it felt while I was living it. Maybe it's… me. And that's okay.

You know, I've thought about what it means to grow up. I've thought about what it means to love, to lose, to be betrayed, to forgive, to laugh at yourself, to cry at things nobody else would ever notice. I've thought about friendship and how it changes, how people drift, how distance hits harder than you thought it would, and how sometimes we only realize what we had after it's gone. I've thought about music and lyrics and the way songs can feel like they were written just for you in a way that no conversation ever could. And I've thought about heartbreak—the kind that leaves invisible scars and makes trust fragile, but also makes you understand how resilient you are, how fiercely you can love and still survive.

And through all of that, I kept thinking: is anyone going to get it? Will anyone understand the way my brain spirals, the way my thoughts bounce from one disaster to the next, the way I overanalyze, the way I cling to small joys like music, laughter, or late-night conversations that never happened? And then I realized, maybe the point isn't for anyone else to understand. Maybe the point is that I finally understand myself. And maybe, just maybe, sharing it with someone—even if it's just a reader, someone who stumbled into my little chaotic universe—is enough.

It's funny, because even as I write this, I can't help laughing at myself. All those times I thought I was overthinking the world to pieces, all those moments I convinced myself that every single small thing was a catastrophe, all those times I worried about who liked what, who noticed what, who cared about what—I can see it now and think: wow, I really lived like my thoughts were a full-time job. And maybe they were. And maybe that was okay. Because they brought me here. To this moment. To this chapter. To this sentence. And you, reading this, have been a part of it.

Thank you for letting me rant about Billie Eilish, about my friends, about crushes that probably didn't even know I existed, about heartbreak, about growing pains, about chaos, about music, about life. Thank you for letting me stumble through words that sometimes made sense and sometimes just made noise.

Thank you for letting me be human in a world that demands we act like perfection is normal. Thank you for letting me be messy, loud, dramatic, overthinking, sometimes silly, sometimes vulnerable, sometimes a little ridiculous, sometimes unbearably honest.

And here's the thing: I don't know what comes next. I don't know what life holds after all of this. I don't know which friendships will last, which songs will carry me through heartbreak, which mistakes I'll make, which regrets I'll feel, which joys I'll discover. I don't know how the future will turn out. But I do know this: I'll keep writing. I'll keep thinking. I'll keep laughing at myself. I'll keep loving the things I love, fiercely and unapologetically. I'll keep learning from every awkward moment, every heartbreak, every late-night overthinking session. I'll keep surviving. I'll keep moving.
And maybe, somehow, that's enough.

So, anyway… thank you. Thank you for letting me talk. Thank you for letting me be heard. Thank you for following along through all the chapters, all the chaos, all the moments I overanalyzed, all the songs, all the love, all the heartbreak, all the laughter, all the tears. Thank you for staying, even when it got messy. Thank you for existing on the other side of these pages, reading, understanding, witnessing, listening. Thank you for being a part of my story, even in the smallest way.

And finally, here's the last thing I'll say: life goes on. It keeps moving. It keeps changing. It keeps surprising . And we… We keep moving too. We stumble, we laugh, we cry, we love, we break, we heal. And somehow, through all of it, somehow against all odds, we find our way. And maybe the best thing we can do is just… keep going. Keep loving what we love, keep laughing at ourselves, keep caring about what matters, and keep listening—both to others and to ourselves.
Anyway… thank you for listening.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE: GOODBYEEEEE!

Goodbye. It feels weird to say it, doesn't it? A single word, small and simple, but somehow heavier than anything I've written before. This is one of the two books I've ever finished and ended, and that makes this goodbye feel even more… significant. Goodbye to all the chapters, all the stories, all the chaos, all the thoughts that poured themselves onto these pages. Goodbye to the moments I laughed too loudly, cried too silently, panicked too dramatically, or thought too much. Goodbye to the version of myself that lived inside every sentence, every line, every word.

I don't want this to feel sad, though. It's not mourning—it's closing. Like finishing a song you love, or finishing a show you've been obsessed with for weeks. There's a bittersweet tug in your chest, yes, but also warmth, because something beautiful existed, and now it has found its end in the right place. That's what goodbye is. Not the erasing of everything—it's the acknowledgment that a chapter has finished. That we have survived it, learned from it, laughed through it, cried through it, maybe even loved through it.

I think about the journey that brought me here. All the chaos of overthinking, the heartbreaks, the music that carried me, the friendships, the crushes, the little victories, the nights I stayed awake replaying every awkward conversation. All of it led to this moment. Every tiny piece mattered. Even the pieces that seemed irrelevant, embarrassing, or painful—they mattered. And now, as I sit here writing this, saying goodbye, I feel the weight of it all, but also a strange lightness, as if letting it go makes room for whatever comes next.

Goodbye also feels like courage. The courage to close a chapter, to say that this is done, that I am done sharing this part of myself in this way. Writing is vulnerable. Sharing chaos, heartbreak, laughter, and love leaves a part of you exposed. But it's also freeing. Because saying goodbye reminds you that you can start again. That the next chapter is waiting, unwritten, and that you can step into it fully, knowing you survived the last one.

Sometimes, I imagine the reader holding this book, or maybe finishing it hours ago, or scrolling through it on a screen. I imagine you feeling something—relief, nostalgia, amusement, recognition, maybe even a small tear at the absurdity of it all. That's the thing about stories: they leave pieces of themselves with you. And if I've managed to leave a little piece of me inside you, then this goodbye isn't really an ending—it's a continuation, in a different form.

I think about all the moments that lived inside these pages. The nights I obsessed over lyrics, the friendships that changed, the heartbreaks that shaped me, the overthinking that kept me awake. The laughter and the tears and the ridiculous dramatics. All of it is a part of me, and all of it is ending here. But endings aren't really endings—they're just a pause. A soft exhale before the next thing begins.

Even as I write this, I can't help laughing at myself. All the times I spiraled, all the panic over what someone might think, all the unnecessary emotional gymnastics I put myself through—they brought me here. They brought me to a moment of clarity and reflection. And maybe that's the best part: realizing that every little dramatic, messy, chaotic piece of you matters in the bigger story.

Goodbye is not about loss—it's about acknowledgment. Acknowledging that something existed, that it mattered, that it was real, and that now it deserves to rest before the next chapter begins. And in the quiet, in the simplicity of just letting go, there's relief. There's gratitude. There's understanding. There's acceptance.

So, goodbye to all the mistakes I've made. Goodbye to all the heartbreaks. Goodbye to all the overthinking. Goodbye to the chaos that seemed endless at the time. Goodbye to the sleepless nights, to the obsessing, to the drama. Goodbye to the fears I thought would consume me. Goodbye to the versions of myself that were messy, loud, awkward, emotional, and confused. And goodbye to you, the reader, for following me through all of it.

And yet… even in this goodbye, there's a strange comfort. Because I know that life goes on. Music will still play, laughter will still exist, friends will still come and go, heartbreaks will still happen, chaos will still unfold. And I will be here. Stronger, maybe a little wiser, maybe a little less dramatic (or maybe not), still me, still moving forward, still loving the things I love, still laughing at the things that matter, and still finding beauty in the small moments that make life worth living.

Anyway… goodbye.
Thank you for listening. Thank you for reading. Thank you for sharing this space with me, even if it was just on paper. Thank you for letting me exist in your world for a while. And if you remember one thing, let it be this: life is messy, chaotic, beautiful, and strange, and sometimes, that's exactly how it's supposed to be.

I love you.

Final Note, Xo.

Okay… wow. We're here. You made it. Somehow. Somehow you survived me, my brain, my panic, my chaos, and yes… my overthinking. Congratulations. Really! Give yourself a round of applause, a cookie, a moment of silence, whatever. Because this book… wow. This book is basically my brain, in text form, screaming at you in chapters, footnotes, imaginary commentary, and probably some very questionable life advice.

So here's the thing: these pieces? Some of them I started ages ago, like "wow, I was dramatic in 2022" ago. Some I started days ago at 2 a.m., eating biscuits, listening to Billie Eilish, overthinking why I didn't start sooner. Some I wrote while pacing my room, some while trying to nap (lol, as if that worked). And somehow… all of it made sense enough to become this book. Somehow I survived long enough to put all the chaos into one place and say, "Yes, this is me. All of it. Take it or leave it."

I decided to collate these pieces into a book because, honestly, I just… needed a home for my thoughts. Somewhere that wasn't my group chat blowing up, wasn't my Spotify playlists judging me or my brain screaming at 3 a.m. Somewhere that could hold all the overthinking, all the music, all the panic, all the chaos, all the drama, all the heartbreaks, all the laughter, all the tiny, ridiculous, unexplainable things that somehow make life worth living.

And let me tell you… putting it together was terrifying. Terrifying in the kind of way where you keep asking yourself, "Wait, are people actually going to read this? Are they going to judge me? Are they going to think I'm… insane?" And yes, probably. But also… yes, probably they're going to laugh, relate, and say, "Wow, same." And that… that is worth it. Every panic attack, every draft I deleted, every "maybe I shouldn't" I ignored.

I wouldn't have done this without some people who… gave me the courage. The friends who laughed at my chaos, cried with me, sent me music links that changed my life, reminded me I was allowed to overthink, allowed to feel too much, allowed to exist as I am. The ones who read my rants, judged me in the best way, and said, "Yeah, Mayowa, just write it." To the random people who inspired chapters, moments, and songs in here—thank you, whether you knew it or not. And to the ones who called me dramatic… Well, that's part of the charm.

And most importantly… Thank you to me. Yes, me. Because finishing this book, actually seeing it through, putting my chaos into something that exists outside my brain? That's brave. That's wild. That's proof that even an overthinking, panicking, dramatic human can create something meaningful. That's proof that my chaos… matters. And if this book does nothing else, I hope it shows you, the reader, that your chaos matters too. Your thoughts, your heartbreaks, your laughter, your Spotify playlists, your random late-night panic sessions—they all matter. And maybe, just maybe, you'll write your chaos into something real too.

Anyway… that's it. That's my last page, my last words, my final scream into the void (well, into your hands, but close enough). Thank you for being here. Thank you for surviving me, my brain, my stories.

Thank you for laughing, crying, and rolling your eyes at all the ridiculous stuff I've said. And if you remember nothing else, remember this: life is messy, absurd, chaotic, hilarious, dramatic, heartbreaking, ridiculous, beautiful, and 100% worth living. Always.
So yeah… goodbye. And also, you're welcome.

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